demo

Issue 16: Hart House 100th Anniversary Edition

PAST PRESENT FUTURE

INTERVIEW WITH LOONY • MUSIC AT HART HOUSE • THE FUTURE OF POP • A HISTORY OF MUSIC

ISSUE 16

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Editing by Chloe Chang

LETTERS FROM HART HOUSE

The letter we write today is not the one we would have written a few weeks ago. Nothing about the way we live in this moment is like anything we have experienced before. Social distancing is becoming the norm and perhaps now more than ever technology is truly becoming our only life-line and source of human connection. Enter music; its universal power has risen to a new frequency; its calming presence feels like something that envelopes us in a global embrace, the perfect antidote for these seemingly fictional times. This was a special year at Hart House. In addition to celebrating our 100th anniversary(!), we rolled out our new *Hip Hop Education* series, stepping up our commitment to explore, understand, and engage with Hip Hop culture. We are grateful to have had the support and participation of many Hip Hop artists, industry personnel, storytellers and influencers contributing their voices to our program. Walk along the front of the building and you'll see the mystical work of Nyle Miigizi Johnston whose Hip Hop-inspired mural adorns the front entrance to Hart House. Dive a little deeper into the lives of our Hip Hop guests in our *West Meeting Room* podcast series where Eternia, Marcus Singleton, and Drezus single-handedly make magic out on the air while giving us a candid window into their fascinating lives.

demo has been a keen partner in promoting and engaging with our Hip Hop Education program and we hope you find the stories in the following pages proof of that connection. We wish to thank the Co-Editors of demo for their exceptional work and vision for this issue and we hope you enjoy the stories within these pages.

Let *demo* guide you back to the healing power of music.

Peace.

Staff Advisors Zoe Dille and Marco Adamovic

Like many of you, I write this from my home while practicing social distancing, with new albums on my home speaker system (Charlotte Cornfield's In My Corner; Stephen Malkmus's Traditional Techniques; and Cory Wong's Elevator Music for an Elevated Mood) . Once I set up my office in the basement, my curious daughter wanted to come work with me. Working in the Faculty of Music, I put on a video of our students performing with So Percussion at Koerner Hall. She immediately picked up her drum sticks and then guitar to play along with them. As I watched her joyfully dance around, I knew that this is what will get me through this moment. From Italian musicians in isolation performing on their balconies, to my kid's own discovery of music, listening and playing has never been more important.

While we all adjust to this new reality, it is a perfect time to learn about new music, for your own health and the welfare of the artists you love. Like our governments are taking extraordinary measures to keep us safe, we must take action in new ways to support our musicians. Throughout this pandemic, buy new albums as they are announced; share old favourites with friends; watch and share live-streaming concerts; call and text your friends in the arts sector to see how they are doing. The future of music depends on it.

Senior Advisor to the Music Committee, Ely Lyonblum

© Illustration by Sherry Liu

As we reflect back on this year at demo, I feel so lucky to be surrounded by such a funny, hard-working, and encouraging team. Massive thank you to Zain, Mena, Jen, Dani, and our staff writer team. Thanks also to Marco and Zoe, for their support, encouragement, and reassurement.

This year I had the pleasure of interviewing LOONY, a Toronto R&B artist who has been on my radar for a while. I was admittedly nervous for our interview, but she was a joy to speak to. She was down-to-earth, funny, and honest. She spoke candidly about the Toronto arts infrastructure which has been often criticized. Check out our interview on page 16.

It's an interesting time for Toronto's music scene. We're finally an internationally recognized music hotspot, especially for R&B. At the same time, venues are closing, and artists criticize the unhealthy atmosphere among fellow creators. The development and future of the scene is something we really wanted to explore with this issue.

The 2020s already have been a tumultuous time of change, and we're sure to see interesting developments in music. 100 years ago, when Hart House first opened its doors, was the beginnings of the Jazz Age. As Jeff Leung pointed out in "But I'm Not A Rapper..." on page 8, jazz continues to heavily influence music being produced today. What trends of today will continue for the next one hundred years?

I hope you enjoy reading this year's demo magazine. It's been a wonderful year with all of you, and we'll see you next year!

Co-editor in Chief, Charlie Jupp

I was first introduced to demo two years ago, at the launch party for their 2018 issue. As someone passionate about music, the magazine was a creative outlet for me, and provided access to the music scene both locally and globally. I am so grateful to both Isaac and Anna for the opportunity to become Editor-in-Chief.

This year's issue commemorates 100 years of Hart House. Given the significance of this anniversary, Charlie and I thought that it'd be a good opportunity to reflect upon Hart House's musical legacy, and the changing scenes of Toronto and the music industry in general. As such, the theme for this year is "the past, present, and future of music".

Given that this was my first time doing anything of the sort, putting together this issue was no easy feat, and it would not have come together without the efforts and support provided by our staff writers, design team, and the Hart House staff. Charlie — thank you so much for being the best person to work with! It's been an absolute honour serving as co-editor with you. Jennifer, thank you for all your graphic design work — the issue looks beautiful. I would also like to thank Umru Rothenberg, who agreed to let me interview him for my piece. He's been nothing but kind and generous with his time.

And lastly, I would like to thank you, the reader - I hope you enjoy this issue! Undoubtedly, these are tumultuous times, and I hope that this issue can provide a distraction for even a small amount of time. If anything, the state of the world today serves to emphasize the role of music and the arts in general, providing us with comfort and relief and unifying us.

Co-editor in Chief, Zain Ahmad

demo has meant so much to me over the past three years. It was a beacon of welcome during first year, for a timid froshie looking to find some semblance of home on campus. It was a source of joy during second year, introducing me to people who I am ecstatic to now call my friends. In this third year as online editor, it has been a fountain of learning: what an honour to be exposed to the bands and genres and ideas that move people! Thank you to Charlie, Zain, Dani, and Jen for being the most patient and loving team. Thank you to everyone who has contributed in any way to our website and magazine— you are our fuel, and I can't wait to see where we go next!

Online Editor, Mena Fouda

This year's edition of demo is a very special one not only because of Hart House's anniversary but also because of the unusual circumstances we find ourselves in at this release. During this time of uncertainty, I am grateful for the technological tools that allow us to communicate virtually and share this magazine with you online. I'm very proud of everyone who put their work into this year's issue, especially the design team, who created powerful and unique graphics and illustrations. I hope that this issue of demo will help ignite your interest in music and encourage you to find a place on campus, like demo and Hart House, to express your passions for music, art, or journalism.

Design Editor, Jennifer Wan

LETTERS FROM THE EDITORS

Past & Present Music Mediums

Music, Mediums, and the Message

Kurt Grunsky

How right McLuhan was when he said “the medium is the message”, even with respect to music! From vinyl to streaming, the formats by which we consume music heavily shape our listening habits and our expectations of the musical contents. It’s time to look back on where we’ve come from, and forward to where we might go from here, comparing the advantages and disadvantages of each medium along the way. I’m not going to pretend this is objective— I have my own ideal way of listening to music and it’s just as informed by the historical context in which I was raised as yours probably is. But maybe, just maybe, I can change your mind about CDs

Vinyl

The “black circle” (as Eddie Vedder once memorably dubbed it) has enjoyed quite a comeback since its heyday in the 60s and 70s. Vinyl remains a very aesthetically-appealing and physically-involved medium, something for those who like to pay attention to the vessel containing the music they love. It’s easily one of the most “frictional” musical medias, defying the current popular assumption that consumers want the most “frictionless” experience possible. Although a number of interesting studies have shown that the vast majority of people can’t actually tell the difference between CDs, mp3s and FLAC, I’ve always felt like I could actually hear the “warmth” some vinyl enthusiasts rave about— though maybe it’s just that the crackle of old records reminds me of a fireplace?

LPs have had a long-lasting influence on our listening habits, too; arguably, their play-time constraints are what gave us the enduring (though currently waning) format of the album, a collection of songs considered together as making up a whole. But vinyl has its downsides: it’s one of the most easily-damageable media and, with its popularity on the market, doesn’t come cheap these days, making it something of a “rich person’s medium.”

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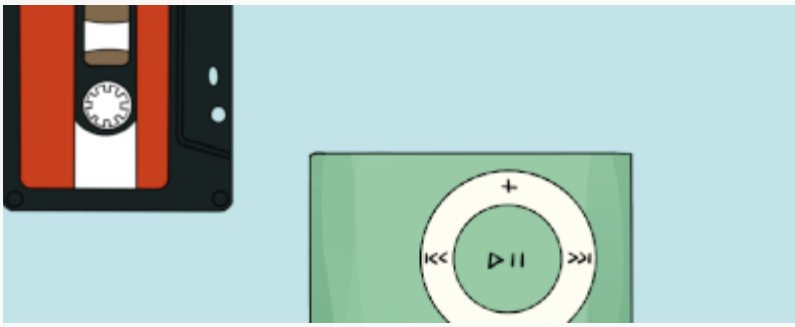


Tapes

Ugh. Tapes have alway been cheap consumer objects, not meant to last. Vinyl might scratch easily, but at least you’d never have to wait several minutes to rewind it only to have the tape tangle up into an unsalvageable mess. And then there’s the sound quality— oh, that lovely “tape hiss”!

Tapes have experienced something of a renaissance in recent years, as they’ve been the cheapest medium available for small-time artists to release a mass-produced physical copy of their music. Some lo-fi artists also feel that their recordings benefit from that aforementioned hiss and general lack of sound quality, and I can’t really argue with that way of thinking. But I can argue with the nostalgic fetishism of tapes that’s paralleled this renaissance in pop culture, creating monstrosities like a cassette edition of Taylor Swift’s Lover. Tapes serve the underground well and they ought to stay there. There’s no good reason for an artist with the means for more to be using them.

CDs

Everyone picks on CDs. This is probably in part because few actually know how to handle them, which is ironic considering that they’re more durable and easier to grip safely than vinyl. It’s simple: think of them as mini-records that also won’t play properly if scratched, but that are conveniently small enough to store in large quantities, allowing you to have a significantly larger CD collection than vinyl collection in any given space. And one thing that’s great about CDs is the digital nature of their contents; unlike vinyl, you can often still salvage a CD’s music on your computer in perfect quality if it’s slightly scratched, backing it up to rip another day.

Let’s talk about ripping for a second: prior to CDs, you could record over tapes and create custom playlists (the origin of “mixtapes”). But this was a bit of a laborious process and required waiting for the whole song to actually play out in order to copy it. The digital nature of CDs allowed anyone with a computer to “rip” and “burn” mix CDs with more ease than ever. The downside, of course, is that computer manufacturers in this day and age increasingly assume that CDs are obsolete and fail to include disk drives. Can you say “planned obsolescence”?

As for the supposed “digital sound quality” of CDs, I point back to the studies proving that most of this is in our heads. And let’s not forget that CDs can hold significantly more music than LPs, though sometimes this has unintended negative consequences; how many 60 minutes plus albums in need of editing released in the CD era were only that long because the artists realized they could be?

MP3s - iTunes and Downloads

Downloadable MP3s brought more than a few major changes to the way we listen to music. Some of the most immediate arrived in the form of the supposed "end of the album" and a quantum leap in recorded music's portability/accessibility. By allowing users to download almost any individual track instead of buying singles or albums, services like iTunes made the album format suddenly seem obsolete - why bother packaging songs in that standardized format if listeners were just going to pick out their favourites from it, stripping away the context of the whole? While walkmans allowed people to take tapes and CDs to places where no LP could venture, the sheer volume of music one could keep in their pocket increased drastically with the advent of the MP3.

You can argue about the value of having a small-yet-treasured collection of albums-not-songs, but I see these developments as largely good things— more room for music meant more possibility for new discoveries, and artists found (and are still finding) some creative ways to play with release formats in the post-physical-media landscape. Another great advantage of the MP3 was its customizable metadata, which allowed listeners to group and re-organize their music through a variety of tags, including artist, album, year and more.

The MP3's greatest advantage, of course, was also its greatest point of controversy: easily replicable, the MP3 raised serious concerns over questions of the ownership of music from multiple parties. From the days of quasi-legal file-sharing on Napster to iTunes' suspicious mandatory agreements that implied users didn't actually own the songs they bought, the MP3 proved to be a slippery format, always eluding possession by musicians, listeners and labels alike. Ironically, MP3s made it both easier and harder than ever to share music - the former for obvious reasons, the latter due to the sudden glut of questionable legal restrictions introduced in the new millennium and the fact that it's hard to feel like you're "sharing" music with a person when nothing physical is exchanged. It's easy to see how these complex entanglements pushed music distributors to new formats, the latest being…

Streaming

It can be easy to see the flaws in the medium that's currently dominant in the market, so let's start with the good things: streaming certainly allows for greater access to more music than before, at least in its current form. It also works as a great "try-before-you-buy" tool… and we've already run into our first problem: streaming services such as Spotify are notorious for barely paying artists for their music, while streaming is now considered a replacement for buying music by many. But streaming's effects on music industry economics have already been well-discussed elsewhere, so I'd like to take a moment to focus on some of the less obvious problems with streaming.

First of all, many services have designed their streaming platforms in ways that effectively replicate (and probably seek to usurp in order to gain a monopoly) the format of the radio. Artists can release their music in a plethora of formats as they could with iTunes, but the actual structure of, say, Spotify always pushes listeners towards the "infinite algorithmic playlist", which is basically a customized radio station sans DJ. This is a deliberate decision on the developers' parts, one that doesn't necessarily limit users' and artists' freedom, but continually nudges them towards a passive mode of engagement with music.

As with many tech companies, the goal behind this is likely to be a "frictionless" consumer experience - Spotify and co. want listeners to have the least "interrupted" listening time (unless you're on the ad-filled free versions, in which case Spotify effectively harasses you into giving them money). This sounds great, until you finish listening to an album you enjoyed and realize that Spotify has already made the assumption that they'll be better than you at automatically selecting the next song you should listen to; "friction" is presumed to be bad, even when it's a necessary component of listener autonomy.

For similar reasons, there's no customizable metadata. When using the app version of Spotify, users can't see the individual lengths of songs other than the one they're currently listening to. "Relax!" it seems to suggest. "Don't worry about how long the next song is, just lose yourself to that frictionless flow…" Beyond these issues, we've already seen how extra-long "algorithm-gaming" filler-stuffed albums have pushed some albums' lengths far beyond that of the CD's. Also, if Netflix is any cautionary tale, we will likely see a fragmentation of music between streaming services in the future, as competitors like Apple and TIDAL threaten to tear discographies apart. Ask yourself: what are we to make of this lack of security that comes with not actually possessing the music you listen to? Am I just supposed to be fine with the fact that A Tribe Called Quest's entire discography could drop out of my streaming collection at any moment simply because Spotify didn't think it was worth having in their database anymore?

Bandcamp

I may think CDs are better than streaming, but I'm no luddite; I see the convenience of most of these recent digital formats and would be lying if I said I didn't take advantage of them myself. That's why I've been pushing for Bandcamp's model as the way forward for a long time now. For those unfamiliar with the site, Bandcamp allows artists to post their music and distribute it in almost any format you can think of, with customizable restrictions. Whether a musician wants to release an album digitally for free, for a fee or for "pay-what-you-can," if they want to ship vinyl or CDs (or even tapes) to those who pay, whether they want to restrict streaming to those who have paid for the full album, or allow users to hear the whole thing online before buying, it's possible on Bandcamp.

Listeners get the convenience of being able to listen to music in multiple formats (at the very least, most releases are available for both download and streaming) and the comfort in knowing that the vast majority of the money they spend on it is going directly to the artist (who can host their music on the site without a label if they so wish).

But Bandcamp hasn't caught on in the same way Spotify has. I've often wondered why this is, and unfortunately it seems to come down to two main factors: first off, it's not as "frictionless" - listeners have to make decisions about who they're going to support on Bandcamp, and it doesn't provide the same kind of "infinite playlist" convenience on many other streaming services. While I see this as a good thing, I realize that not everyone does, and some people don't want to have to think about what they'll listen to next. Second, labels still have a lot of power in terms of marketing and distributing music, and with Bandcamp as a threat to that power, it shouldn't come as a surprise that most big-name artists don't release their music through the platform. All this being said, I'm hoping someday everyone will see the light and ditch Spotify for this obviously-superior service.

Video ©MrDeshawnRaw, screenshot by editor

BUT I'M NOT A RAPPER

Jeffrey Leung

"We culture. Rap is the new rock and roll. We the rockstars!" ~Kanye West

The rap genre has expanded and evolved so much that it has become almost unrecognizable from its humble beginnings of Sugarhill Gang's "hip hop the hippie the hippie to the hip hip hop". Sugarhill Gang and their contemporaries spelled out random words to fulfill single rhyme schemes over basic boom bap beats. Since then, rap has been used and fused with many other genres beyond hip hop, from rock to jazz. Even when it's not fused with anything, hip hop has several sub-genres that deserve mention. While the popularity of artists like Ed Sheeran, Eminem, Drake, and the Weeknd demonstrate that rap's fusions with pop and R&B have not gone unnoticed, other sub-genres deserve mention, particularly rock/rap, jazz rap, and industrial rap.

ROCK

His thoughts are whacked, he's mad so he's talkin' back
Talkin' black, brainwashed from rock and rap
He sags his pants, do-rags and a stockin' cap
His step-father hit him so he socked him back
And broke his nose, his house is a broken home
There's no control, he just lets his emotions go
~Eminem, "Sing For The Moment"

With roots in rebellion, as well as explosive, controversial popularity among youth, and rabid fan-bases, rock and rap share many characteristics beyond musicality. This is something that both rappers and rock artists have capitalized on, beginning with early offerings from Beastie Boys and Run DMC. Both groups lean more towards a rock influence in terms of guitar-heavy instrumentals, and simple-yet-catchy verses with flows and delivery more reminiscent of Led Zeppelin than Ice Cube.

While both rap and rock evolved into more sub-genres, rap/rock itself changed For example, the rise of alternative rock and metal gave rise to Nu-Metal, with bands like Limp Bizkit and Linkin Park fusing grimy, heavy guitar riffs with boom bap drum lines and rap verses that sound the part but continue a trend of vague in lyrical content (I challenge people to find any Linkin Park song with a Mike Shinoda verse besides Hands Held High that solidly defines and follows a set topic without being vague). Deserving of mention is also artists like Lil Wayne and his album *Rebirth*, Yelawolf, Tech N9ne, and Eminem. Though technically rock/rap fusion, it can tend to result in the artist rapping over a boom bap beat with a looped rock sample in it. There are exceptions, of course, such as the excellent Tech N9ne/Corey Taylor collaboration on "Wither" and Yelawolf's "Marijuana".

JAZZ

And I was just a virgin, a baby
One of the reasons I looked up to him crazy
I used to love to play my demo tape when the system yanked
Felt like I was almost signed when the shit got cranked
~Kanye West, "Drive Slow"

While rock and rap are similar in terms of cultural status, rap and jazz share a remarkable similarity sonically, with soulful love ballads over soft, piano-led instrumentals not feeling out of place in either genre. Even in gangsta rap releases, like Nas's classic *Illmatic*, many of the beats had

a piano-heavy, laid-back feel to them. Due to the sheer amount of jazz-influenced rap music, it's actually quite difficult to find a well-known song that does not have at least some jazz or blues element to it. Early groups with an obvious jazz component include The Roots, De La Soul, and A Tribe Called Quest. Particularly, the latter's sophomore album, *The Low End Theory*, heavily influenced artists like Mos Def and Kanye West. Speaking of Kanye West, much of his earlier output — *Late Registration and Graduation* in particular — was littered with soulful, jazz-hop production. West incorporated string and brass instruments, as well as other symphonic instrumentation that brought him critical acclaim. His more romantic, vulnerable lyrical subject matter in songs like "Hey Mama", "Drive Slow", and "Spaceships", was seen by many as a catalyst for a shift in hip-hop and rap. It marked a switch away from the more aggressive gangsta rap era, popularized by artists such as NWA, Nas, and Kanye's own mentor Jay-Z, to a more melodic and self-aware lyrical era within the genre.

Of course that's not to say that the grandiose, braggadocious nature of hip hop lyricism has disappeared. Even the sudden surge in popularity of hard-hitting trap artists aside, the more humble and self-aware have fused this vulnerability with the unapologetic vitriol of past to create "conscious gangsta rap", where artists like Kendrick Lamar and J. Cole thrive.For example, on J.Cole's "1985 (Intro To The Fall Off)" he over a jazzy A Tribe Called Quest sample while calmly talking down to his detractors, more in the vein of a concerned father rather than angry battle rapper. Cole is able to acknowledge his own biases while at the same time lambasting his opponents in a controlled, condescending manner.

EXPERIMENTAL/INDUSTRIAL RAP

So many years of this violence
Now we're surrounded by the souls of the dead and defiant
Saying, "Look what you've done, you designed it"
When the bough breaks, hear the wraith scream, "Riot!"
-El-P, "Thieves! (Screamed the Ghosts)"

Since the 90s, hip hop has had its fair share of dark, grimy production and grim, dystopian lyricism. However, this griminess has evolved over time, growing even more hard-hitting and darker. Minor chord piano loops over 808s often give way to less melodic,mainstream musicality and instruments, in favour of synths distorted to the point of unrecognizability, and drum lines that bear more resemblance to a 21 gun salute than actual drums. Lyrical themes in experimental and industrial rap and hip hop are more abstract and open-ended, though still retain cultural relevance. For example, on the Run the Jewels song "Thieves! (Screamed the Ghosts)" El-P describes protests in America as a sci-fi, dystopian apocalypse, where all dissent is crushed by tyranny. Other notable musicians include JPEGMAFIA and Clipping., both who almost entirely eschew traditional instrumentations in favour of distorted sound effects and synths. The result is a manic, uncomfortable atmosphere. The effect is notable on Clipping.'s song "Story 2", which tells the horrifying story of a man learning of his family's passing in a fire; the speed of Daveed Diggs' vocal delivery, and tempo of the beat increases every second to match the dawning realization of horrifying reality. ■

Photo © Daniel Lewycky 2020

MUSIC @ HART HOUSE

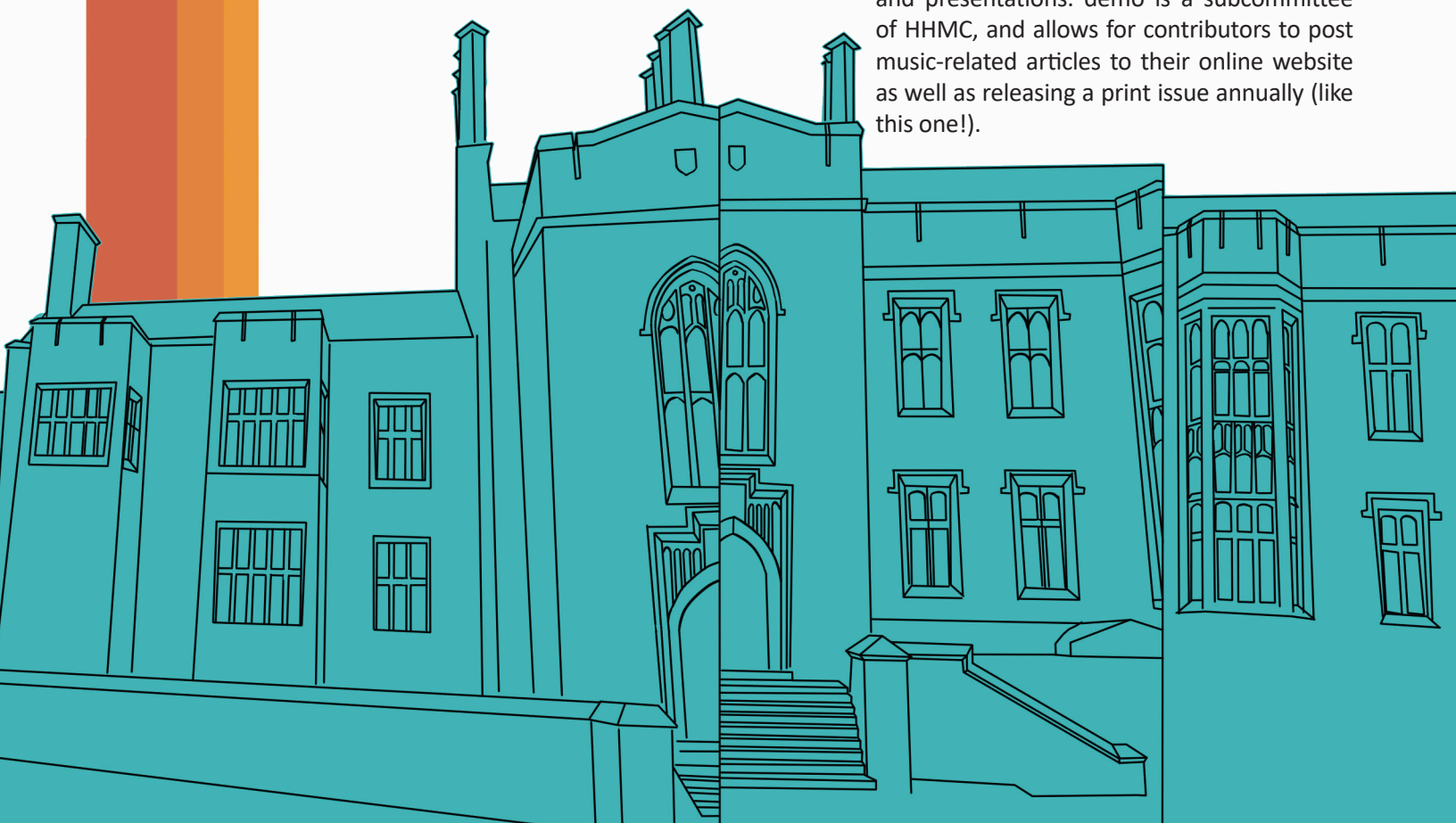
HartHouse as the music lover's happy helper

Eram Lee

During my short time here at the University of Toronto, the university's programs, drop-in classes, galleries, shows, and historical significance have been mostly lost to me. I'm just an undergrad student desperately trying to pass my classes, and not fall privy to seasonal depression (which everyone at school bonds over, what with winter lasting well over four months). But I also love music. I can't play an instrument, I only sing in the shower, and I can't tell you anything about music theory, but I love listening and exploring to new music, going to concerts, and pretending I have an emotional connection to all my favourite artists. Besides boring my friends about the thematic expression of a new album or discussing how the cultural background of an artist could influence their art, my only outlet in expressing my too-keen interest was in the form of dozens of Spotify playlists and getting too excited when someone would show me new music. It never crossed my mind that a place like Hart House could provide a space for my interests to grow into an extracurricular. But after learning about Hart House Music Committee, and meeting similar people, I realized that for the past hundred years, Hart House has curated this space that allows not just music majors, but student musicians, producers, local icons, and simple music lovers like me to connect and learn from one another. Rather than being an over-glorified YMCA with better architecture, Hart House is a haven for all those musically inclined, and here's exactly what they have to offer.

Hart House Music Committee

Hart House Music Committee organizes a ton of events throughout the year, a staple being their monthly open-mic nights. Open-mic nights are pretty much defined by name, but it's a space where anyone can sign up and share whatever they'd like, be it a song or dance or stand-up poetry. They also host music-related events, panels, and presentations. demo is a subcommittee of HHMC, and allows for contributors to post music-related articles to their online website as well as releasing a print issue annually (like this one!).



Hip Hop Education Program

The Hip Hop Education Program was launched this year, and aims to promote awareness on hip hop's integration into mainstream culture, and what hip hop represents to visible minorities in Toronto. The program dives deeper than just defining the genre of hip hop and showing you a few Biggie songs; it explains the importance of hip hop's role as a voice for minorities and explores hip hop's relationship with politics. The Hip Hop 101 Cafe is a monthly discussion group that discusses how hip hop influences today's culture, and connects local hip-hop community leaders and students. Another resource is the Humanz of Hip Hop Library, which is a human library that features local and leading figures in the hip hop industry.Students can "rent" them out, and hear their personal stories about hip hop, their identities, and career. The Producer's Circle, at UTSC, brings together music producers and beatmakers to share their work, discuss ideas, and create a network.

Hart House Singers

The Hart House Singers are a non-audition choir for U of T students to explore culturally diverse music, as well as choral works with historical significance. Hart House Singers is perfect for the ones that love to sing but don't know where to start. HHS have performed at Nuit Blanche, with other student orchestras, and with graduates from the Faculty of Music and the Royal Conservatory of Music.

Hart House Jazz Ensemble

A band made up of students across colleges, majors, and campuses, the Hart House Jazz Ensemble allows students from all walks of life to jointly explore their love of Jazz. According to a former Jazz Ensemble performer, Jason Town, he loved the ensemble because it was "open to any student in any program, so it was really diverse and I met a lot of cool people. Especially because I was in classical performance, I really wanted to play in a jazz ensemble so it was a really fun opportunity". Hart House Jazz Ensemble plays a ton of gigs around Toronto, especially at the iconic Rex Hotel Jazz and Blues bar.

Hart House Orchestra & Hart House Chamber Strings

A professional chamber orchestra that's arguably the most prolific music program at Hart House, what with being founded in 1954 and having represented Canada at the Brussels' World's Fair in 1958. Hart House Chamber Strings is a student run ensemble for string instruments that performs concerts biannually.

The list of musical ventures goes on, with drop-in DJ classes, classes on how to interview and photograph a musician, and more. And the results of these have reached across through intergenerational connections. Hart House also has a mentorship program, and mentors who've explored their love of music in such programs have been able to pass on their experience to their mentees and current students. If you're like me and you're looking for an outlet to express your love for music or talent, take advantage of Hart House. Seriously. ■

IF YOU LIKE THIS BAND

THEN YOU'LL LIKE THIS LOCAL ACT

© Photo by Alicia Owen

Malcolm Standing

Montrealers eternally mock Toronto, claiming it's a dull, expensive, and soulless place that can't compete with the cultural energy of our more sophisticated Francophone sister city. While Toronto might be dull, expensive and soulless, we've certainly punched above our weight class culturally compared to other cities of our size and caliber. Despite the richness of Toronto's music scene, many would struggle to name a local artist outside of Drake. Thankfully, the internet has given us the opportunity to explore what this city has to offer without leaving our dorm rooms. I've compiled a selection of local artists who I think can serve as an *amuse bouche* for all the great music this city produces.

If you like: Mac DeMarco
Check out: Nutrients

Mac DeMarco probably helped kickstart one of the most imitated styles in indie music since Vampire Weekend made polo shirts cool. Bright guitars, simple grooves, and a laid-back lo-fi atmosphere nostalgic style all helped make a one-of-a-kind sound. While he has had many imitators, few come close to capturing the *je ne sais quoi* that made him an indie star. Nutrients realize this, and their sound throws in a few more ingredients that make them stand out from the crowd. Their September single Such Slime showcases how they make up for this. The boyish charm of DeMarco is supplanted by lush vocal harmonies that dance with the equally lush horns and guitar. In any other situation, music like this would be crowded and decadent, but Nutrients makes it work. The vibes stay mellow, but with such a breeziness that the music just beckons for you to pay attention. Definitely check them out if you are into the lo-fi sound of DeMarco and similar artists.

Also check out: Elijah Cumbo

Cumbo wears his influences on his sleeve much more overtly than Nutrients but still deserves an honorable mention. If you're looking for something that plays closer to the DeMarco sound, they might be a good bet. While it isn't terribly adventurous, his work still maintains a cloying, chill sound that you can't help but be enamoured by if you are a fan of Mac's work.

If you like: Lo-Fi Hip-Hop Beats To Relax/Chill/Study To ++
Check out: Mix Foley

What can be written about Lo-Fi Hip Hop that hasn't already been written? Perhaps more importantly, what can be written about Lo-Fi Hip Hop that won't sound banal to everyone who has listened to what the genre has to offer? Lo-Fi Hip Hop is one of the most important musical *experiences* of millenials and Gen Z. It is entirely internet based, a reflection of the atomization of our social lives while we seek solace in an anodyne distraction. Or the more likely explanation: we just love the vibey, repetitive, and chill beats because they sound good and provide nice ambiance for just about everything.

If you're interested in exploring instrumental hip-hop outside of the confines of lo-fi hip hop, give Mix Foley a try. All the components you know and love are here, but with an added experimental twist. Vocal samples and skillful production tricks make his work something worth the try. The abstract nature of the work doesn't make it good background music, but it does demonstrate how instrumental hip-hop has more to offer than music to scroll through Twitter to. Also, it would be remiss to mention instrumental hip-hop without pointing you towards the father of the genre, the late, great J Dilla. Despite not being from Toronto, J Dilla almost certainly had an impact on Foley and all producers like him. ■

It would be impossible to scratch below the surface of Toronto's music scene in a single article. If you're yearning for more, check out social media, streaming services, and publications just like *demo* to find more great Toronto acts.

WHAT IS IT ABOUT *Boy Bands?*

Adsaya Anpalagan

There's something about boy bands that makes preteen girls' hearts sing— maybe you yourself had a boy band crush. Maybe you have a sibling who is currently obsessed with the latest teen heartthrob. Or a mom who was deeply in love with a band member from the 70s.

What's the deal with boy bands? Why are they constantly in the hearts of preteen girls? And are the boy bands of present the same as the boy bands of past?

THE BEATLES

Boy bands are a group who sing together, maybe dance, and usually wear the same clothes, but they probably don't play any instruments— but that's not always been the case. The Beatles, were one of the most successful groups of all time; their albums consistently made platinum. Their second American-released album, Meet the Beatles!, reached #1 on the charts in just two weeks in 1964. Four years later, their single "Hey Jude," remained at the top of the charts for nine weeks in 1968. The Beatles broke records and made history. As anyone will tell you, they're legendary.

THE BACKSTREET BOYS

Fast forward to the 90s and take a look at the Backstreet Boys, who formed in 1993. There's probably a chance your older cousin or your cool aunt had pictures of Nick Carter hung up in their teenage bedrooms. Their most famous single, "I Want It That Way," is still a hit today, and is a classic when the radio station needs a throwback. The Backstreet Boys are considered by many to be the beginnings of the stereotypical boy band genre as we know it today. They were normally seen all wearing the same outfits, with their very 90s hairdos, showcasing their moves on stage to screaming girls.

THE JONAS BROTHERS, 1D, AND BTS

While The Jonas Brothers were the biggest boy band to come out in the 2000s, but it wasn't until 2010 that the music industry really saw a resurgence of the boy band. That year, One Direction formed on Simon Cowell's British talent show The X Factor. They broke some typical boy band conventions: didn't wear the same clothing, nor did they have dance routines; still, all of their albums went platinum. There was massive obsession with the band, and most of the band's young fans' first heartbreak was when member Zayn Malik announced his departure. There's another type of boy band that has gained massive popularity in the 2010s: K-pop boy bands. The most well known, perhaps, is BTS.The Korean band have an intense fanbase, who call themselves the BTS Army, who can be seen all over the internet, despite living all across the world. The BTS Army is wild for their boys, who have brought back the traditional boy band coordinated fashions and dances.

While the image has oscillated over the years, so too the boy band sound has changed dramatically. Autotune and electrophones have really played a huge role in transforming the music. Bands like the Beatles lacked the same resources to use autotune, so what you heard on the records was what they sounded like live. If the song didn't sound right, or the singers were pitchy, they'd have to sing it over. Today, if management doesn't like the way a boy sounds in a song, they simply do some adjustments on a computer to make it sound better.

Despite the differences in sound, dances, and styles, all boy bands have that one good thing in common: their looks. From Timberlake to Styles, Lennon to Seavey, they all have their ways of making young girls' hearts flutter. Some young women say the music and adoration of their favourite boy band is a way to escape from the real world. Boy bands get a bad rap, but they've changed the music landscape, and made the world better for many preteen girls.

The Untitled Creative

Kris Moda

When I think about the artists in my life, I always reflect on the uncertainty involved in living life as a creative. More than anything, being an artist means being on a never-ending journey of creating something from nothing, and there are a lot of internal and external pressures that can make it hard to remain in a productive, creative mindstate.

Quite a bit of that pressure comes from the city we live in. Toronto is one of many global cities where, despite working full-time jobs, people still struggle to pay the rent. The downtown core is gentrifying at an unnerving rate, and established and new artists alike are being forced to move to the suburbs, as rental prices in the city's centre soar and force them to choose between their art and making ends meet. Non-central parts of the GTA like North York, Etobicoke and Scarborough are housing more and more of the city's best artists, and downtown Toronto isn't as central to the music scene as it once was.

Despite the cutthroat rental market, Toronto is still undeniably one of the most artistic cities in Canada. Our city is home to some of the biggest art galleries in Canada, and is a destination city for Americans and Canadians alike looking to pursue careers in music and the arts. There are cafes, restaurants, and bars that regularly host both local artists and well-known artists from all around the world. Sometimes, at the same time and same day. The city has a body and mind, and knowledge and creativity are its resources.

Several of my friends have played in bands for decades, and while they all have unique personal stories, there are a few elements of each of their stories that they share in common. The first is that they are mostly self-employed independent contractors, meaning that they all work side jobs to support their art. I like to call them 'the multi-hyphenated.' Bank teller-musician, server-musician, school teacher-musician, warehouse worker-musician, bartender-musician — no matter the combination you think of, there's some musician out there who fits the description. I do know a few full-time musicians as well, though they are a minority. Doing music full-time carries a certain prestige for musicians, and at the same time, usually the lowest pay. It requires a lot of luck and dedication, and not everyone has both.

Talking with the working musicians I know has really deepened my respect for their hard work and individual stories. Take Leighton Harell, for example. Leighton was eighteen when he decided to leave his hometown of Raleigh, North Carolina and move to Toronto in order to study jazz performance — which he refers to simply as Black American music, rather than just jazz. He had been playing the upright bass in bands since age 12, but Leighton knew he needed to grow and struggle in a city like Toronto in order to reach his full potential as a live musician.

Leaving the South behind and starting a new life to pursue his dream wasn't easy, but Leighton was driven, and started performing at bars, cafes, and almost anywhere he could get onstage. He later started his own band, and they play live sets almost every day. When I asked him if he would change anything about his path so far, he said "not a single thing." Studying at the University of Toronto's Faculty of Music helped him develop his craft as a bassist, and explore the world of jazz with the support of mentors and a strong peer network of classmates and fellow musicians.

Studying music at the university level isn't the only right path, though. Another of the musicians I know, Jonathan Labao, is a multi-instrumentalist who has been making and producing music since before he could even ride a bicycle. Raised in Scarborough, Jonathan decided to pursue cinema studies at the University of Toronto after finishing high school, despite having aspirations of working as a musician. In conversation, Jonathan explains that by choosing to study something other than music, he was able to keep more doors open for himself creatively and expand his knowledge of the world. It's a very DIY path, but it works for him.

Studying cinema instead of music has meant that Jonathan has had to continue learning music on his own, outside the classroom. While he is studying film, he still performs regular gigs, networks with other musicians and practices daily. He has even managed to start a band called Hotel Pablo while in school. Hotel Pablo has performed a number of gigs across Toronto, and they are about to release their first EP this summer. It's clear that Jonathan's path is the right one for achieving his long-term goals. When I asked him if he would change anything if he could go back in time, like Leighton, he said "not a single thing."

In short, being an artist doesn't mean the same thing for everyone. One's artistic identity forms from doing long-term creative work, and through expressing your own life in your work. This means that there's no cookie-cutter path that will lead anyone to becoming a successful artist. If you have that drive in you, it's up to you to find, create and navigate your own path of self-discovery. Nobody else can do it for you. ■

"Artist" isn't a superficial label – it's an identity that forms from long-term creative work."

LOONY IS SCARBOROUGH'S RISING STAR

The singer on Toronto, stepping out of her comfort zone, and making her own rules

CHARLIE JUPP

After a tumultuous morning of losing my wallet, cracking my phone screen, and chasing after the streetcar, I arrived at the small cafe where I was meeting LOONY. I gathered up the change I had from the bottom of my purse, bought a small coffee, and waited for her to arrive.

As soon as she arrived, she greeted me with a hug. "How are you?", she said, as if we'd known each other for years. I told her about my morning. "Oh my god, can I buy you a coffee? A muffin?" After assuring her that I had a coffee and enough change to get home, she ordered a coffee and a brownie. "I don't even know what this is," she shrugged, gesturing to the frothy drink on the table. "I need caffeine, though."

LOONY is an independent singer-songwriter who has been making waves on the Toronto R&B scene since she released her first single, "A Small Flame", in 2018. The track, which is full of vocal harmonies, and a sweet, neo soul bassline, was produced by Toronto producer Akeel Henry. The pair still work together today. "We're super close. It's like brother-sister vibes, we're just talking shit. If you see us together, you're gonna think we hate each other. But it's all love."

Akeel Henry is an important figure in the Toronto R&B scene. After interning with OVO producer, 40, Henry worked with artists like Roy Woods, Shawn Mendes, dvsn, and 88rising.

LOONY met him through… Kijiji. "I'm not even joking. I put up an ad trying to find band members and I got some. One of the guys knew Akeel— his brother knew him in high school— so he thought we would maybe get along. We met three years ago and pretty much since then it's been a really good working relationship," she said. "He brings a lot out of me that maybe I couldn't get to before that, it's special. I think a lot of people feel that way about him."

Meeting Akeel and her bandmates, who all hail from Durham ("I swear to God, there's something in the water there, man"), was serendipitous timing. Though LOONY is a Scarborough native, she moved to Montreal for university, where she found herself disconnected from her music. "I lived in Montreal for four years, and I still don't know much about the music scene there. I was just trying not to fail school." While she tried to make music in her own time, she found it hard to balance school with her passion. "The whole time it was kind of sad. I was waiting to come back to Toronto and start making some moves, music wise. I didn't really have a lot of direction."

After graduating from McGill University in 2016, LOONY returned to Scarborough and found her people. "Toronto is a huge place for R&B," she said. "Toronto really started that lo-fi, kinda vibey, chill waves type stuff. There's a very obvious niche sound. Or I could be tripping 'cause I'm from here, so that's why I'm like "Yeah, we invented that.'"

I asked her who her dream Toronto collaboration would be. She considers the question as she takes a bite of the brownie. "I'm really into Daniel Caesar," she responds. "I remember hearing it while I was in Montreal and I was like, "This is what Toronto is on right now?" And I was so excited 'cause it was so different, but so good. It's so funny, 'cause the Drake stuff is so modern and it really relies on, like, a lot of cool ass effects. Then Daniel Caesar and Charlotte Day Wilson feel so organic."

LOONY

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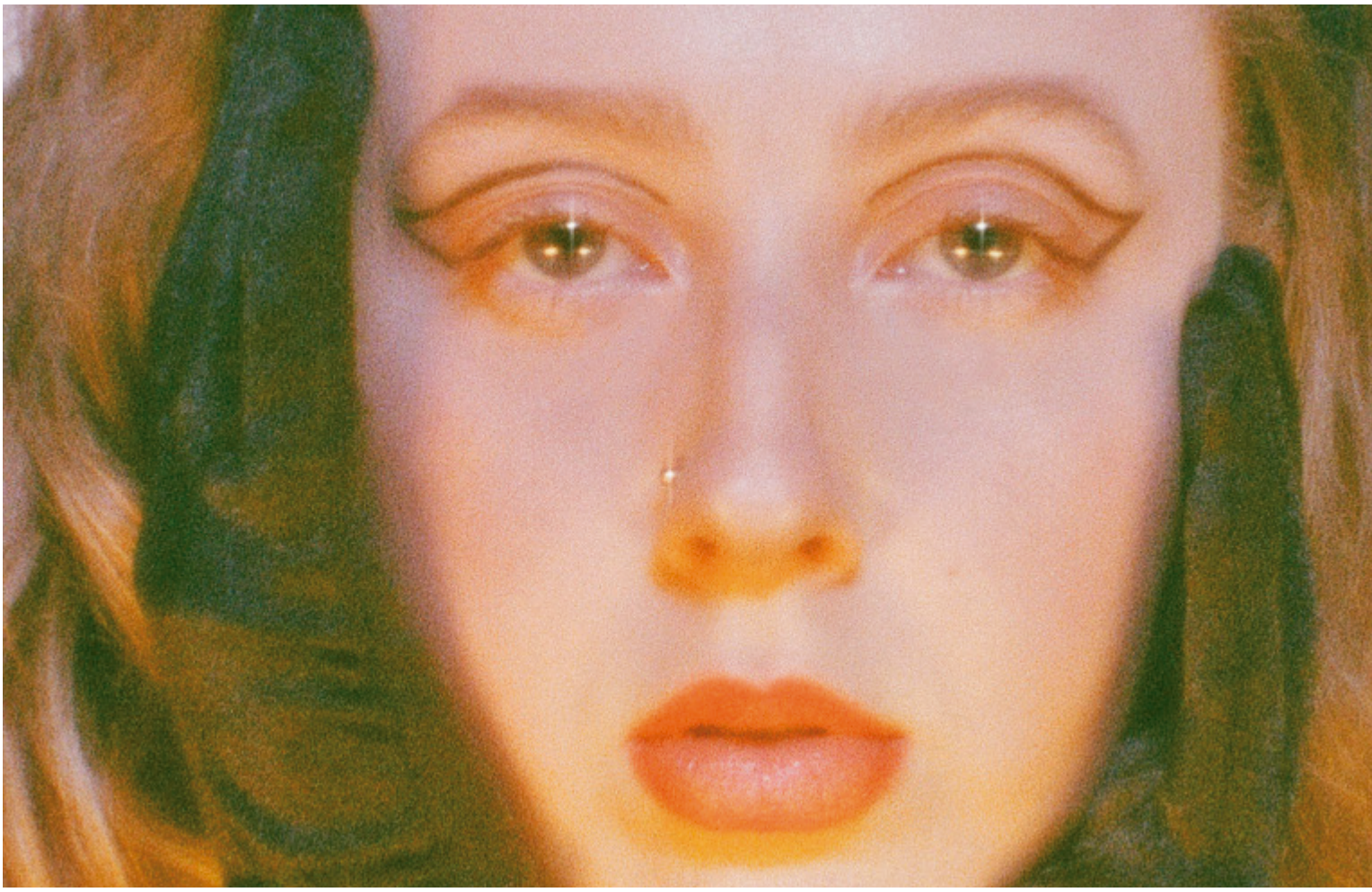
Editing by Chloe Chang



LOONY made sure to shout out other Toronto musicians she points to as inspirations: Monsune, byi, Yuka, Amaka Queenette, and Chris La Rocca.

While there are many fantastic musicians and creative projects coming out of Toronto at the moment, the city's art infrastructure has also been heavily criticised. Last year, Toronto creator and writer Danica Samuel wrote a viral blog post titled, "Toronto's creative industry is toxic — that's why I'm leaving". In it, she talks about the difficulties of creative industries within Toronto, which she blames on both a lack of infrastructure, and a lack of community. Samuel's complaints have been echoed by many journalists, artists, and DJs in the Toronto scene.

"It's tricky," said LOONY when I asked about the lack of infrastructure and the intense competition. "The community can be really competitive. Just because I feel like there's less opportunities. You see in the States, how many people support people from like their hometown without even knowing them. It's kind of shocking sometimes. Not to say people don't support each other here, but no matter who you're supporting there's a level of competition, because you feel like you have fewer opportunities. And maybe you do."

That being said, LOONY recognizes that for her, things may be a little easier. "Also, I'm speaking from how I look", she adds. "A white, you know, cis woman and shit. I might think things are a bit easier than they actually are. I don't want to, you know, not appreciate that the infrastructure is in place and all that shit. And even then I'm finding it fucking hard."

"I have this song called "Some Kinda Love", and I thought the whole project was going to feel like that. But it doesn't feel like that at all. It feels modern. Akeel described it— which I thought was so interesting— as an organized chaos."

Still, she emphasizes that there are a lot of opportunities for musicians in Toronto. "There's a lot of really great organizations and people that go out of their way to help the music community in Toronto. SOCANs great. And there's Artscape. I remember one of the first places where I won studio time was because I was doing some talent show for some rehabilitation centre in Scarborough." Sometimes, Toronto is even better than LA: "I got a grant that really changed my life, from Ontario Arts Council. If it weren't for them, I wouldn't have been able to make music for the past two years. The US doesn't even have grants."

The grant from OAC enabled LOONY to release her EP, *Part I*, in 2018, and continue to work on music today. Her first single, "WHiTE LiE", from her upcoming project was released on February 27. "It's different. Kind of scary," she admitted. "I don't think it's obvious that I'd put out a project that sounds like this." When LOONY first began working on the project, she thought it was going to sound soulful and organic. "I have this song called "Some Kinda Love", and I thought the whole project was going to feel like that. But it doesn't feel like that at all. It feels modern. Akeel described it— which I thought was so interesting— as an organized chaos."

© Photos Alan Powichrowski
Editing by Chloe Chang

"WHiTE LiE" is the first of three singles to be released, with the rest coming later this spring. LOONY described the writing process as "really intense". After working on the project for a year, the singer and her producers went on a retreat to "a weird little house in the woods" in rural Ontario. It was there that the newer sounding project came together.

Rarely does she find herself at her most creative in the studio: "I don't find studios to be so inspiring, usually. I'm not that type of genius songwriter, where I can just push songs out." Instead, she finds herself going back to old notebooks, and poems. "It's a weird mixture of like, old poems, and on the spot writing, if we're in a place that's not too sterile, corporate feeling." I ask if anyone has ever called her out on a song she wrote about them. "Yeah, and I'm like "don't feel nice,'" she laughs. "It's just one of the songs. It's not about you. You're merely a pawn."

"Is it hard to re-engage those feelings?" I asked. "Sometimes performing certain songs live is so strange," she replies. "Only if I'm, like super in my feelings. Usually it's fun. I just try to detach the art from the person. Especially by now, like I genuinely don't care. It's cool."

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Editing by Chloe Chang

"I'm a perfectionist, and even then, things never end up perfect. At a certain point I have to just put something out into the world."

Currently, LOONY is independent; though, in the era of the internet, as well as musicians like Chance the Rapper, Noname, and Brockhampton (the latter of which are signed now, but were independent upon the release of the *Saturation* trilogy), it seems like having a label isn't as necessary as it once was. She mused over the question for a moment when I asked about being independent. "Having money would be nice for sure. I think it's just good to be independent until proven otherwise. I don't feel a need to beg for anything." Being independent also allows her flexibility and control. "I do know a few people where it's maybe wasting a little bit of their time or like stressing them out. Nothing super crazy, I'd rather just be stressed out in this way. Like make my own rules a little bit."

At the moment, making her own rules has been working for her. She spent last autumn touring Western Canada ("I didn't know Canada was that beautiful!") with Canadian band Rhye, who she described as "super sweet, with a lot of really wise things to say. Watching them perform was crazy". Her tracks have been played across the world on BBC radio, and on the television show *Shameless*. Her first headlining Toronto show will be at the Drake Underground on May 27, and it sold out in less than 24 hours. It's been a challenge, but she's up for it. "I'm a perfectionist, and even then, things never end up perfect. At a certain point I have to just put something out into the world." ■

Across the Campfire

Mena Fouda

For as long as humans have existed, we have found comfort in storytelling. Our ancestors sat around campfires, and passed down chronicles from one generation to the next. Parents worldwide caved into the requests of their children, crawling into beds and recounting tales from faraway places. Every time I sat down to write a creative story as a child, I would read the words out loud. Saying 'once upon a time…' felt like bringing a picture to life.

Music has brought us together in a similar way. It has kept the oral tradition alive. Attending concerts is the modern parallel to attending a campfire. As people, we crave the community that forms from sharing our stories with each other to create bonds. At a concert, we all turn to face the same direction, our dance moves echoing each other's, our lips mouthing the same words.

Sometimes, it's hard to feel that intimacy in big spaces. Giant concert halls feel too vast to develop a direct connection with the artist. Perhaps that is why bands like Glass Animals are choosing instead to play smaller venues, like Mod Club, to re-establish that bond. There's a reason why their latest tour is coyly titled Déjà Vu.

Furthermore, nostalgia culture has been a tremendous factor in determining the type of art that gets developed and released in recent years. Sounds are constantly compared to sounds of the past ("that Arctic Monkeys album sure has a 70's space lounge vibe to it!"). There are even attempts to recreate the trends of the past, like the failed Woodstock reunion; there has been a resurgence in the popularity of vinyl and tapes. We constantly turn to the past in order to give our present meaning. In a chaotic world that just keeps on getting busier, sometimes it is comforting to strip things back to the bare necessities. So, what are those necessities?

Programs like Artery attempt to answer that question with their slogan: "every space is a stage". Artery provides a way for artists to connect in intimate spaces. Every weekend, people across Toronto sign up to host artists in their apartments, their houses, their terraces, or their studios. In this way, it deconstructs the idea that high arts belongs in sterile spaces. Art does not belong in cold museums, or in corporate-named arenas. We shouldn't have to stand a designated 5 feet away from art at all times. Art should be in spaces that encourage the flow of ideas from one person to another, creating dialogues that transcend language and barriers.

Artery is a program fueled by social media. Every weekend, Artery posts a list of events on their social media stories, with a location and brief description of the act. For example: 'LESLIEVILLE: an Egyptian jazz-funk quartet plays in a cozy apartment' or 'QUEEN ST. W: local drag queens perform pop renditions in a bohemian living room'. All you need to do is RSVP by messaging them on Instagram, and they'll reply with the details.

You can also filter through their website based on the type of performance you are interested in (like music, comedy, food, or fashion), or the space you'd like to be in (a balcony, a café, a treehouse, or even a mystery location). Artery operates within a realm of relative anonymity, which creates an exciting sense of mystery, and invites you to look past the name and face of an act. Forget the title of the film, just watch it with no reservations. The audience is bound by their curiosity and desire to discover undiscovered voices.

Artery brings forth an element of accessibility to the scene. Gone is the traditional proscenium stage set-up. Instead, artists from all around the world set up their instruments in living rooms, with audiences splayed out across the furniture. Personally, it reminds me of weekly show-and-tell sessions from elementary school. We convene on the carpet to learn more about each other. Our wide eyes drink in the artifacts that people have gathered up the courage to bring from home. We are a people who crave the nuanced movement of leaning in around the camp-fire, intrigued at the stories that we are privileged to hear. Every time an artist gets up in front of an intimate crowd, we participate in reviving that oral tradition that has shaped our stories through generations. More so, we participate in rejecting the idea that art should be exclusive—that the worthiest albums are created in pristine studios, or that the most valuable sounds can only be heard in exchange for a $250 arena concert ticket. We reject the idea that art requires specifications in order to mean something to someone.

So once again, what are the bare necessities to the art-form of music? The baseline is to create a dialogue between people, as we have done throughout history. Music is communal. When a song is shared and an audience member closes their eyes and sways in reflection, that is the art-form at its best. There is intimacy in connecting with artists who create their art with fervour and who perform it in unconventional spaces in the midst of a bustling city. There is beauty in stories that are shared through the plucks of a sitar, and courage in the rising volume of previously unsung voices. ■

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CAN THE PROTEST SONG SURVIVE

SABA JAVED

For the past several years, music news outlets have lauded the term 'political anthem' out into the ether, applauding even the most thinly veiled attempts by popular artists to keep up with the 'woke' tide as it pushes in and pulls back out, in some strange oscillation between the extremes of cancel culture and the absolute nature of fan loyalty. In years' past, musicians have released records that have claimed to speak for a generation

The history of resistance and reclamation through music is a rich one, but in the pseudo-political climate of the late 2010's, has the power and validity of this concept become muddied? What does it mean to make political music? To listen to it?

The concept of the political anthem is not a novel one. There have always existed songs that sway the minds of mainstream listeners— a gateway drug to the more radical messaging of songs in other genres. From Bob Dylan's "*Masters of War*" to Public Enemy's "*Fight the Power*", the protest song is deeply ingrained in public consciousness.

People often see pop music as a form of careless escapism. In high school, I once confided in a friend that, after a long and overwhelming few months studying, I longed for a way to turn off my mind. He responded by giving me the link to a playlist rife with brassy voices and peppy choruses; a carefully curated selection of Fifth Harmony, Ariana Grande, Shawn Mendes, and a smattering of boy band chart-topping singles. It was an invitation to *not think*.

But if we are to understand pop music as an escape from reality, we also need to understand that pop music's jumping off point is grounded in real life. Much of the pop music we listen to today is semi-autobiographical — this is especially true when thinking of the heavy-hitters in the singer-songwriter space, such as Lorde.

If pop music starts from a place of personal and real experience, perhaps its final form is less an escape from the banal and mundane aspects of daily life, but rather a way to translate these experiences into something greater than an individual reckoning with something that feels overwhelming.

I used to think that my belief that pop music used to have a happier sound was foolish, influenced by the fact I was contending with the end of my own childhood, rather than an actual shift in tone. But it's true — the genre has developed an increasingly sad quality (just look at Billie Eilish!). Pop music is about translating an individual experience into a universally relatable record. This means, then, that today's sound reflects a time in which existential dread over climate change, a widening wealth gap, an impending economic collapse, and an increasingly polarized world have arrived at the doorstep and let itself into the house of public discourse.

More and more, artists are opting into taking a stance on whatever issues they deem important; the results range from cringe-worthy to enthralling. In the last few years, female artists have made a concerted effort to offer up feminist anthems to their audiences, the majority of which fit neatly into an 'equality via capital accumulation' model. Take, for example, Ariana Grande's *"7 Rings",* in which the singer asserts her female dominance through an excessive display of wealth. Don't get me wrong - I think it's a bop as much as anyone else; however, it is just one song in a sea of feminist songs that align neatly within the paradigm of white neoliberal feminism. These often white, female musicians frequently appropriate aspects of songs produced by artists of colour, through their clothing, accents, slang. Major pop artists often produce their records on the backs of those whom they take from. For every song that represents a generation of misunderstood and marginalized folks, there are hundreds of poorly constructed, lazy, and performative songs, without any care for the messaging, but rather the *edge* of having *something to say*.

In line with the neoliberal pop anthem comes Taylor Swift's hit *"You Need to Calm Down",* which offers the LGBTQIA* community a catchy response to discrimination. In past years, Swift had been heavily criticized for her silence in political discourse, both within and outside of the music industry. After her slow foray into activism (which included discussions on gun control and women's rights), Swift opened herself up to a different kind of criticism by grounding herself firmly into the position of Politically Active Artist. Though "*You Need to Calm Down"* is an unapologetic declaration of allyship and a celebration of the LGBTQIA* community in Hollywood, other aspects of it are generalizing to a fault. In the song's celebrity-packed music video, the anti-LGBTQIA* protesters are portrayed as unkempt trailer park dwellers, red in the face with rage as they raise signs and march along, a glaringly obvious depiction of trailer trash. This depiction demonstrates

THE CYNICISM OF 2020?

an inability to understand the harm of this stereotype and its ties to classist violence. While it is an incredibly powerful LGBTQIA*-positive message from the world's biggest pop star, is tainted by this stereotype of the rural poor.

It is precisely this capitalist, centrist brand of activism from pop musicians that is so disheartening to observe. Many of these songs lose their potentially moving meanings because of the obvious marketing tools used in the construction and communication of these 'protest songs'. It becomes harder to believe the genuine emotion behind these songs when the rainbow-, pink-, or green-washing is so glaring. This messaging can seem lacking in nuance at best, and false at worst.

This is not to say that all pop artists are committing similar blunders in their activism. Just last year, The 1975 released a track from their upcoming album, *Notes On a Conditional Form*. The eponymous song is simple; a Greta Thunberg speech over a hopeful piano track. Coldplay is another band that has leaned into climate consciousness; in November, they announced they will stop touring (at a considerable financial loss) until they are able to do so at a carbon-neutral footprint.

As well, inspiring, inclusive feminist anthems do exist in pop. "*Pynk*" by Janelle Monae is a soft dream of a track that celebrates female sexuality, and is accompanied by a visually stunning video featuring vagina pants galore.

Pop music has always been exceptional in bottling up and selling the intangible parts of our current culture, and Lana Del Rey is unparalleled in her ability to critique just that. On her latest album, *Norman Fucking Rockwell!*, she is masterful in contending with what it means to navigate love and heartbreak while taking apart iconic American imagery and identity.

Outside of pop, artists continue to push back against claims of performative politics, ***. FKA Twigs channels Mary Magdalene on her latest album of the same name, transforming the anguish of chronic pain into a treatise on female dignity and strength. Meanwhile, Sampa the Great's "Freedom" beautifully explains what it means to confront "the choice to compromise your artistic freedom".

With the pop music industry producing new tracks at break-neck speed, I don't forsee the mainstream pop-protest-anthemis going anywhere in 2020. Rather, I do hope we see at least a slight shift towards undeniable, genuine passion, instead of the sickeningly sweet marketing campaigns. Artists know the intelligence of their audience; hopefully marketing teams, in all of their self-indulgent, persuasive advertising, will realize that performative politics may one day go out of fashion.

As much as activism in the pop music scene can seem nauseatingly peppy, pandering and problematic, I am in no position to tell you to reject the music you love. As I sit here griping about the shallow nature of pop music, I recognize that what is personal is also political. Perhaps I have done a disservice to the genre by limiting the concept of 'political music' to music that makes a statement about current social policy (most of which is western-centric). After all, is it not political to lean,no, launch oneself completely into experiencing an album? To love the art we consume, wholly? Is there not something political about embracing the teen girl in all of us, to feel glee and to care about something seemingly 'frivolous' when increasingly, the norm is cynicism and apathy? ■

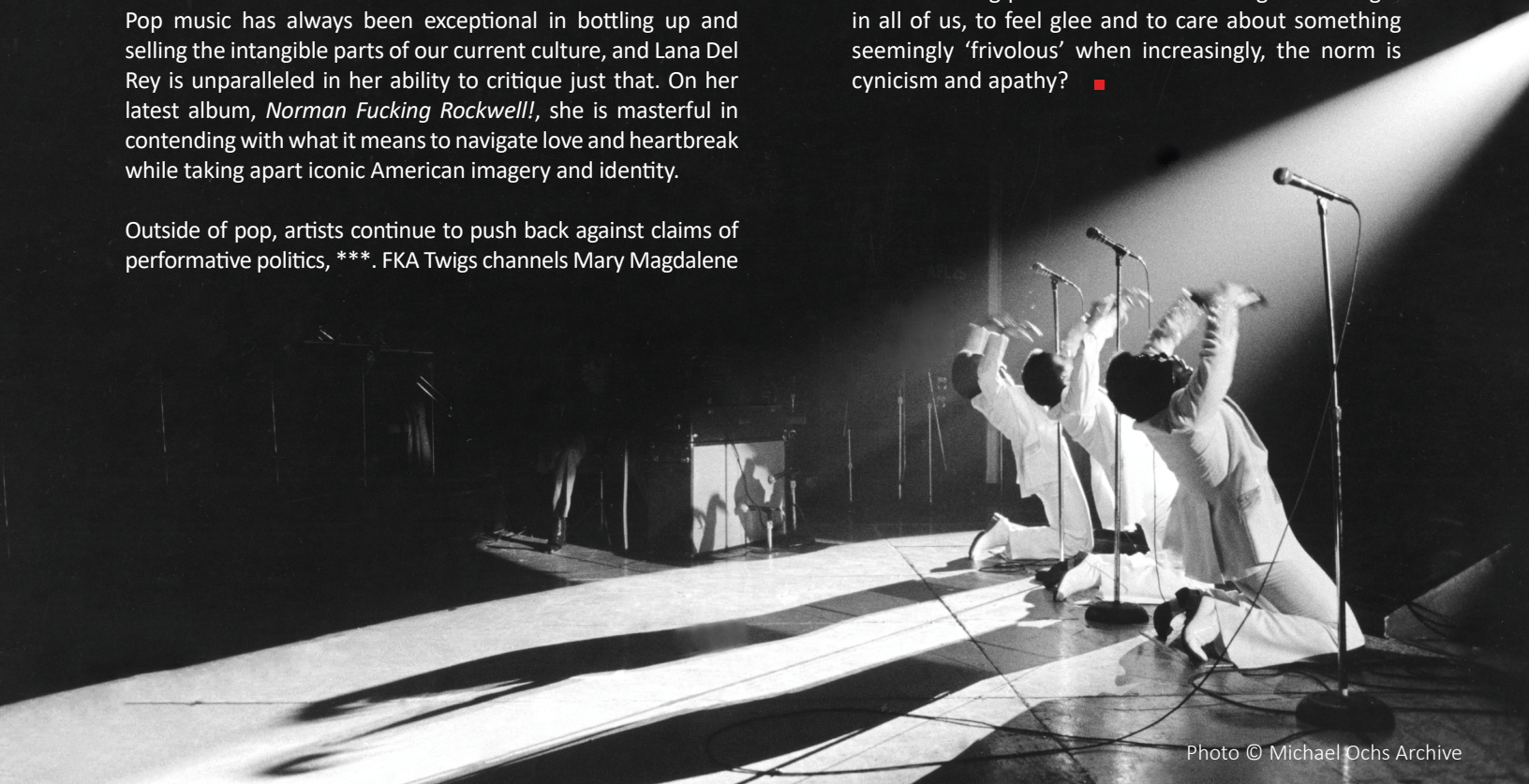


Photo © Michael Ochs Archive

The Crossroads of Music & Medicine

What UofT researchers have to say about sounds and our cells

Marina Ogawa

If I'm having a bad day, I always turn to "No Tears Left to Cry" by Ariana Grande.

The rainbow imagery combined with its upbeat tempo just oozes positivity.*"I'm pickin' it up, pickin' it up / Lovin', I'm livin' so we turnin' up",* she sings to me, a mantra through my earphones.

Time after time, I keep finding myself going back to the song. It might just be my favorite pop record within the last few years. It's definitely a fun guilty pleasure and a genuinely healing one for me. I'm sure that everyone has a meaningful song like this in their music library.

Music can certainly be a tool to soothe ourselves emotionally, but what if music has the ability to heal ourselves beyond that — on a physical level, too?

The clinical applications that arise from the interactions of music and medicine is a discipline that is becoming an area of interest to many researchers: "It's fascinating and powerful to think that music, something that has been floating around in our environment forever — that this natural, omnipresent human activity has demonstrable benefit as treatment" said Sara Hoover, co-director at the Johns Hopkins Center for Music and Medicine, when I spoke with her.

Here at the University of Toronto, several researchers from the Department of Music and Health have recently published studies that affirm the potential benefits that arise from interactions between music and medicine. Professor Lee Bartel was the founding director of the Music and Health Research Collaboratory at UofT. Along with his extensive teaching experience, his leading research has paved the way for many others interested in music therapy. In a 2017 TED Talk, Dr. Lee Bartel presented the findings from several studies which suggested that stimulating cells with sound can reduce the risk and impact of some common health problems.

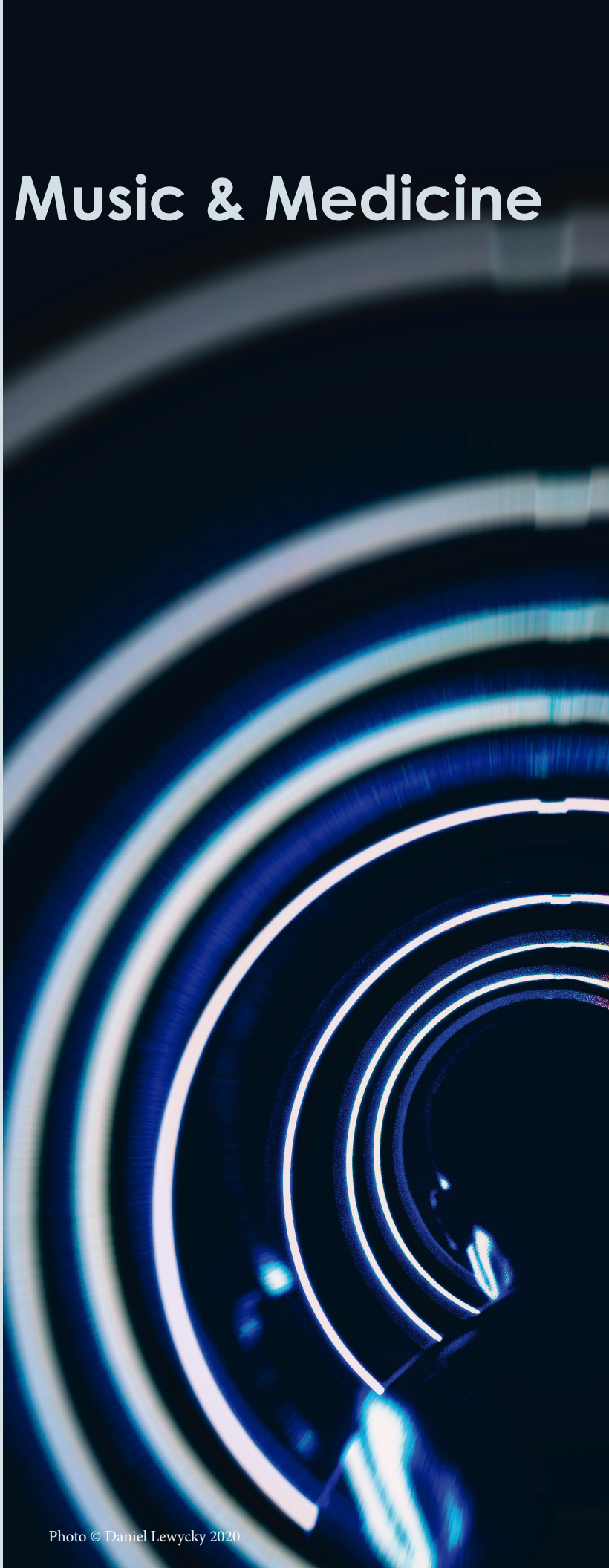


Photo © Daniel Lewycky 2020

A 2016 collaboration study with Amy Clements-Cortes, Heidi Ahonen, Michael Evans, Morris Freedman, and Lee Bartel focused on Alzheimer patients, ranging from mild to severe cases. The three-week study exposed patients to either 40Hz sound stimulations or a DVD video, for 30 minutes 2 times a week, and quantified the results through test scoring. The patients who were exposed to the 40Hz sound stimulations showed completely different results from the patients shown the DVD video: "The results surprised us [...] We were getting results from patients such as people saying in the third week, 'oh I remember doing this before,'" Dr. Bartel commented.

Dr. Bartel began to wonder about the long-term benefits of these results. He conducted further studies on a woman with fibromyalgia, who received 23 minutes of 40Hz sound, two times a week, for five weeks. By the end of the study, a chiropractor confirmed increased mobility with her shoulders, better sleep quality, and felt that she no longer required medication. The study was repeated on 19 fibromyalgia patients — and by the end of it, 100% of patients had reduced their medication. In his closing statement, Dr. Lee Bartel commented: "Now in the not too distant future ... when a doctor encounters something like Alzheimers or depression, they might take out their prescription pads and write a prescription for sound stimulation... and that's music medicine at the cellular level".

Dr. Amy Clements-Cortes is an assistant professor at the UofT Music and Health department and worked alongside Dr. Lee Bartel in the 2016 study. She is also a music therapy instructor at Wilfrid Laurier University, a credentialed music therapist, and registered psychotherapist. Her clinical research includes matters such as the benefits of music therapy in palliative and cancer care, and her ongoing research includes topics such as examining the benefits of music therapy for performance anxiety in music education students. Because of her extensive clinical experience, I was interested to find out more and wanted to directly hear the thoughts of a music therapist.

A misconception that many people have about music therapy is that it is not as simple as it sounds: and I was quite guilty of having this preconception too. It can be as technical as any other scientific discipline, which is a fact that surprised me upon watching Dr. Lee Bartel's TED talk. I luckily had a chance to sit down and interview Dr. Amy Clements-Cortes about this.

Q: Is there something that a lot of people get wrong about music therapy?

A: People often confuse all music experiences as music therapy. Giving an iPod to someone is not music therapy [...] Music therapy is an evidence-based discipline, where a client meets with a therapist and monitors the client's goals. The goal is not to play a musical instrument — which is a common misconception, but goals include things like decreasing depressive symptoms, decreasing pain perception, enhancing relaxation, improving cognitive function, among many things. Music therapy may benefit a variety of populations from premature babies to those in palliative care at end-of-life.

Q: Is there currently a lot of research being done on music therapy? What are some of the large and upcoming issues that research is hoping to pursue?

A: There is considerable music therapy research on individuals with dementia, those in palliative care, individuals with autism and many more. I would say there are more mixed studies now, performed on large scales. There is always more research needed, but there is a lot of evidence that music therapy is beneficial for a number of symptoms!

Q: What do you hope to see in the future with music therapy?

A: [...] Music therapy in Canada is recognized as an official healthcare profession that receives government funding so that there is dedicated funding. I would like to see music therapy as a covered health care cost in private health plans, just the same as seeing a psychiatrist — something that could become a legitimate expense that could be written off in health insurance. I would like to see it recognized, rather than having to work on grants or donations. Given the evidence that music therapy works, I'm not sure why we are not there yet.

As Dr. Clements-Cortes has expressed —it is clear that there are benefits to music therapy, but it has not yet been launched as a discipline that is granted a presence as large as other kinds of therapies. But after learning more about this area of research and having the opportunity to chat with Dr. Clements-Cortes, I personally feel very hopeful about the future possibilities of music therapy. As we reflect on our theme of 'Past, Present, Future', it's encouraging to see how far music therapy has come. The effort that comes with years of controlled research, clinical trials, and funding is surely not an easy achievement. As of now, music therapy is continuing to gain international acceptance and ongoing research persists.

The future with music therapy seems optimistic — it might just be that music can heal us emotionally and physically too. As Professor Lee Bartel has affirmed: "What we know now is that music is necessary to us, at the cellular level too". ■

IN CONVERSATION WITH RIIT

THE INUK ELECTRO-POP STAR ON THE FUTURE OF MUSIC, HER INFLUENCES, AND MORE...

CHRISTINE BRADSHAW

Ethereal, brisk, and shimmering are just a few words that describe the sound of Inuit musician, Riit. She mixes Inuktitut, throat singing, and field recordings from the arctic with synth pop and electronic stylings, creating her own sound and space within the electropop world that is fresh and captivating. We discussed her experiences within the music industry and the inner workings of her debut album.

Photo © Jen Squires

YOU RECENTLY CAME OUT WITH YOUR DEBUT ALBUM ATAATAGA. WHAT WERE YOUR INFLUENCES FOR THIS WORK?

I think that all of the songs that I wrote, I wrote within like five years. I always say that I am always envious of people who could just write lyrics on the spot. This album had various different life experiences that made me write the songs. And, I don't know, wanting to speak out about the problems that we face as Inuit in the north.

COULD YOU SPEAK A LITTLE BIT ABOUT THE NUNAVUT MUSIC SCENE?

Yeah! There are so many amazing Inuit artists in Nunavut, and we often describe it as world class music because there is so much amazing music coming out of here. And it's just unfortunate that we don't have the resources, or the performing arts center to help us really go to the next level. Once Iqaluit music was created, I think it was a step in the right direction in supporting artists.

LET'S TAKE IT BACK TO THE BEGINNING: HOW DID YOU GET INVOLVED IN THIS MUSIC SCENE AND HOW DID YOU START?

I think I've always kind of been into music. When I was growing up, every Sunday, they had a church for youth group in the evening, so that's where I really started singing. I think the first song that I ever wrote was with one of my best friends during a music camp, where the members of The Jerry Cans came to Pang [Pangnirtung, Nunavut]. I think that's where my interest in writing my own songs really started. I was about thirteen, I think!

YOUR ALBUM WAS PRODUCED BY THE POLARIS PRIZE NOMINATED MUSIC PRODUCER GRAHAM WALSH. HOW DID YOU GET CONNECTED WITH HIM AND IT WAS WORKING WITH HIM LIKE?

It was through a friend. After the first Nunavut Music Week, one of the members of SOCAN connected us with Graham, and he asked if it was of interest. First, he said that he produced Hannah George's album. So I listened to that for about a month and it became a big interest of mine work with Graham. Neville from SOCAN connected us with Graham and it just happened!

It was really amazing working with Graham because at first I was a little bit scared to work with a non-Inuktitut producer. I kind of had no choice because there's not a lot of producers in Nunavut. But Graham was really amazing, because I would just explain the songs to him— what they mean, and where they come from, told him about my experiences, and he just did an amazing job of capturing the emotions and sounds that I wanted in the songs. So yeah, it worked out.

WHAT IS YOUR MUSIC WRITING PROCESS LIKE AND HAS IT CHANGED OVER THE YEARS?

I don't think so. Like I said earlier, I feel like I'm a really slow writer. Well not a slow writer, but it needs to be the right time and the right emotions need to be like in me. I think I usually get most inspired when I'm back home in Pang, because it's my comfort space. Usually the way I write songs is I come with a melody first on an instrument— whatever instrument— and feel it out and just see where it goes.

GROWING UP, WHAT DID YOU LISTEN TO AND HOW DO YOU SEE YOUR OWN SOUND DEVELOPING?

I listened to a lot of Inuit music, like Elisapie Isaac and Beatrice Deer. I also listened to a lot of pop music growing up, like Lady Gaga and Nelly Furtado. Pop music has always been an interest for me. But with my album, I wanted to create a sound that hasn't been done before. It was a lot of fun creating the album and mixing throat singing with electronic music and just getting creative with it.

THIS IS A VERY OPEN-ENDED QUESTION BUT IT'S THE THEME OF OUR MAGAZINE... IN YOUR OPINION WHERE DO YOU THINK POP MUSIC IS GOING?

[Laughs] I don't know! It's really hard to say because I find like it's always up and down. Sometimes, I'll hear a pop song and it's clearly just a song that maybe they hope will be the next biggest pop song or something. But then other times I'll just have my Spotify playing, and just a random, really good pop song will come on. I think that's how I discovered Sylvan Esso; it was just through a random playlist, but that was one of the moments where it was like "Wow, this is so good!" They're not trying to be the biggest pop stars but they're just making music because they want to make it, and it's good, it's raw. I don't know, it's always up and down.

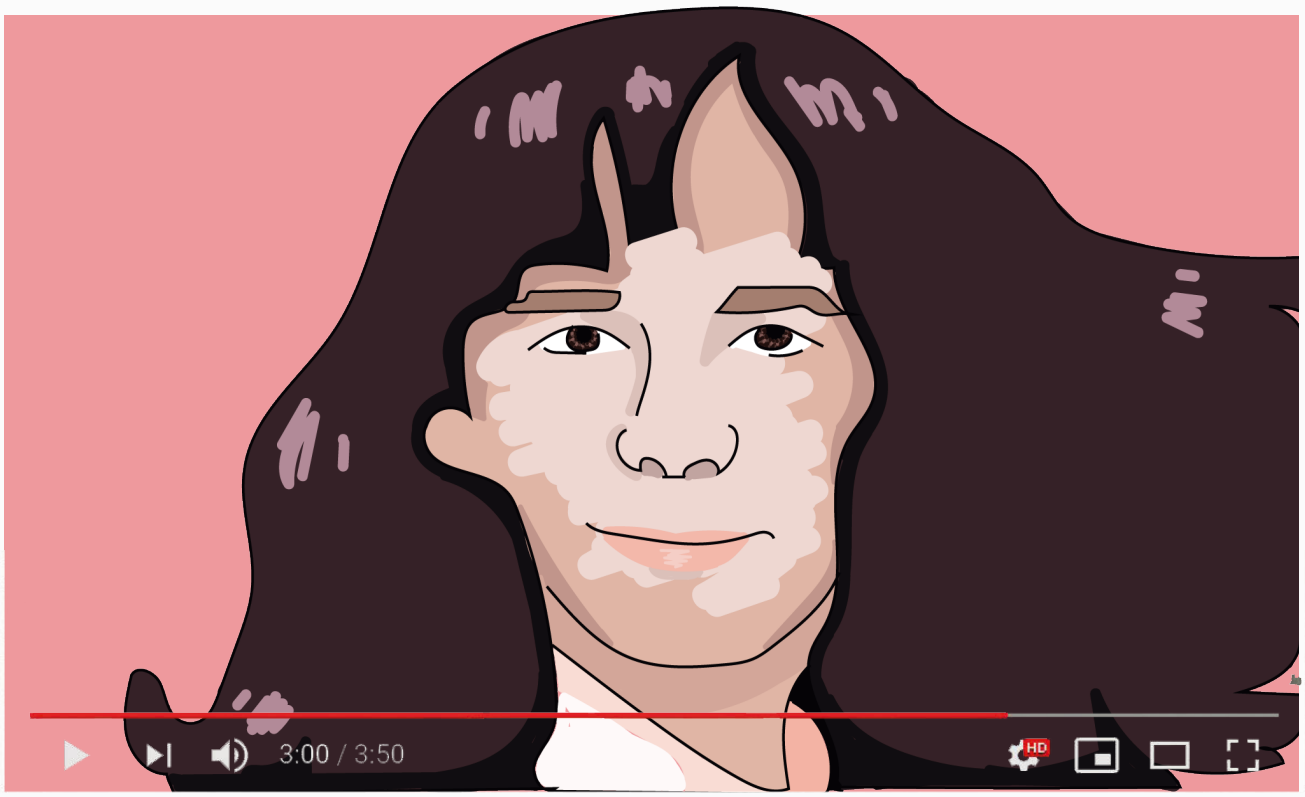
IT'S HARD TO PICK, BUT I THINK MY FAVORITE SONG ON YOUR RECORD IS #UVANGATTAUQ. DO YOU WANT TO TALK ABOUT THE INSPIRATION BEHIND IT?

It's inspired by the Me Too Movement. Sexual abuse is still very present in Nunavut, and there's so many people who suffer the trauma from it. I wanted to write a song to support those women, and also to call out people who have done that to women, or to people, and to shine a spotlight on them. Just to let them know that it's not okay to do that anymore. Like, especially in this day and age, there's so many people who are naming their abusers. It's amazing to see, but I just want men to know that they just can't get away with that anymore. If you're going to do that, you're going to be called out and everyone's going to know.

FINALLY, I BECAME AWARE OF YOU BECAUSE YOU PLAYED THE CAVALCADE OF LIGHTS LAST NOVEMBER. HOW WAS YOUR EXPERIENCE DOING THIS AND DO YOU HAVE A FAVORITE PERFORMANCE EVER?

Cavalcade was pretty crazy! Just performing for a large crowd like that, especially as a small-town Inuit musician, I never thought I would play for a big crowd like that.

I think my favorite performance was probably at a tattoo studio in Toronto. It was a little social gathering with industry people, but I just remember it clearly. I think it was one of my first electronic shows, and I liked performing for a small crowd because I liked feeling intimacy with the crowd. I like feeling close to them, so I think that was one of my favorite shows. Also, because it was Alexia's [throat singer Alexia Galloway-Alainga] first show with me. It was just so much fun because we haven't really performed together before until that moment. Just exploring throat singing with her I think was one of my favorite parts of it. ■



How the Youtube Algorithm Maintains a Musical Status Quo

488,594 views 24K 461 SHARE SAVE

demo by Sana Mohtadi 7.39K subscribers SUBSCRIBE

illustration by Jessica Merritt

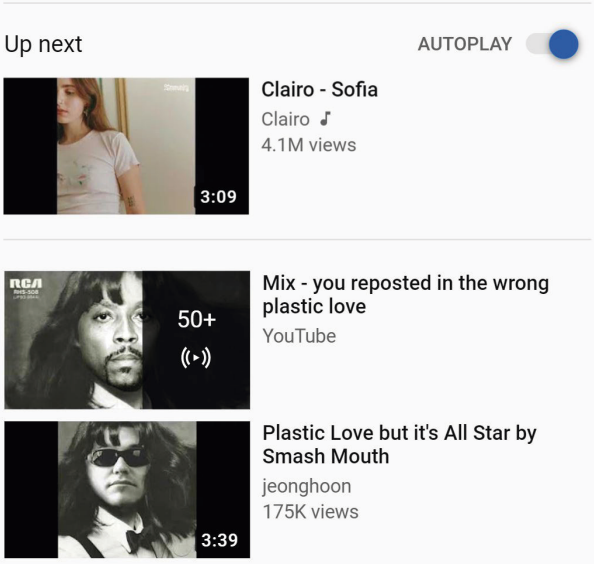
Read through the comments section of any suddenly-popular YouTube video, and you're bound to come across the same, familiar comments, along the lines of, "glad the algorithm brought me here," or "this video was posted in 2007. Why is it in my recommended?" The culprit is the seemingly incomprehensible "YouTube algorithm," a digital mechanism that processes search results, view-count, age, gender, geographic data, watch time, and other determinant factors in order to amass site traffic. Nevertheless, the algorithm has managed to recommend videos that seem culturally irrelevant, divorced from "what's hot," either online or otherwise.

The question remains: is the algorithm primarily concerned with maintaining the website's profitability, or in the words of YouTube itself, "to help viewers find the videos they want to watch, and to maximize long-term viewer engagement and satisfaction"? The introduction of advertisements placed within videos and throughout the site's interface has revolutionized online monetization. Individual creators have the ability to personally profit from the insertion of branded content in their videos, inadvertently bolstering YouTube's own profit margins in a mutually beneficial cycle. And yet, videos that are not monetized, that are uploaded by individuals seemingly clueless to the financial trappings of online content

creation, frequently find themselves placed at the top of the recommended sidebar. The recommendations can be highly personalized, based on one's previous viewing habits, or seemingly random, attributed to the algorithm's attempts to predict user behavior.

One such video is Mariya Takeuchi's "Plastic Love," a modest Japanese city pop hit, originally released in 1984. Posted on YouTube in 2017, the song quickly garnered millions of views, repopularizing Takeuchi's track long after its original release. The newfound popularity of "Plastic Love" raises questions about the power of the "YouTube model" in shaping consumer tastes both online, and how such recommendations are translated into record sales. Numerous music and culture journalists, as well as fans alike, have attempted to get to the bottom of the "Plastic Love" phenomenon, coming to different conclusions regarding the popularity of the track. Some claim that its similarity to Vaporwave — another genre that often blends Japanese pop, New Wave, and techno beats, in addition to sampling video game soundtracks, infomercials, and muzak into a uniquely internet-era sound — explains its sudden success. Beyond attracting fans of Vaporwave and other web-based subgenres, the newfound popularity of "Plastic Love" is a testament to the advertorial strength of memes. Following its rediscovery, the Takeuchi track spawned numerous re-recordings and remixes, such as "Never Gonna Give You Plastic Love," a mashup of Rick Astley's "Never Gonna Give You Up," an internet phenomenon in its own right. Most recently, Warner Music Japan released a music video for the song's 30th anniversary, although it's unclear whether such plans were in the works before its rebirth as a viral video. Evidently, there is still money to be made in forgotten records, thanks to the power of clicks.

The "Plastic Love Effect" is not exclusive to nostalgic throwbacks. While Japanese city pop has experienced a resurgence in popularity, contemporary musical acts have also benefited from YouTube's algorithm. Take, for example, the track "Evertime" by Swedish singer-songwriter Boy Pablo. The song was added to the YouTube recommendation tab and racked up millions of hits, with the artist emerging from relative obscurity and into the spotlight in a matter of weeks. A classic case is Clairo, a 21-year-old bedroom-pop singer whose single "Pretty Girl" (filmed in Photobooth in her university dorm) went viral. The singer herself attributes the popularity of the track to YouTube's recommendation model, saying "I put it on YouTube, and then the algorithm



just ate it up." Clairo herself has come under intense scrutiny for being an "industry plant," an artist who "disguised as an independent," while simultaneously benefiting from the promotion a large music label can offer them. It follows that the sudden popularity of the aforementioned artists has been popularly attributed to both YouTube's design as well as the platform's ability to advertise artists as DIY sensations, regardless of their affiliation with a label. Whatever Clario's industry origins or lack thereof, a pervasive distrust in AI-assisted streaming services is growing. Unlike "Plastic Love," a case study in random virality, both Boy Pablo and Clairo represent an emerging class of tastemakers that operate within the bounds of the internet, as opposed to outside of it like their predecessors.

And yet, YouTube is not concerned with the "quality" of recommended content, but rather its shareability, its ability to generate revenue and site traffic, consistently drawing both habitual and unique visitors to the site. It allies itself with platforms such as Spotify, who tailor the infrastructure of the platform in service of the user, all the while reaping the benefits of subscriptions to premium accounts, or by embedding advertisements throughout. In replacing traditional avenues of music promotion, an algorithm is undeniably impacting the popularity of certain tracks or artists across myriad genres. YouTube, a platform that once appeared "anti-establishment" is now *as*, not *more*, susceptible to corporate influence. In other words, claims that the internet by definition "democratizes" music production neglects the corporate and technological biases literally encoded within their model. Perhaps that's why the Clairos and Boy Pablos of YouTube have not introduced a new sound or model of pop-stardom to the world, and how could they? Lo-fi, bedroom pop is nothing unfamiliar to fans of Daniel Johnson, Ariel Pink, or the Cocteau Twins. A homespun video may get you a record deal — but only if what you're offering is something familiar dressed in new clothes.

GET OVER IT!

Kathryn Beaton

Anyone who has tried to enter into a conversation about music will have unfortunately come across prejudice. We are all guilty of judgement to varying degrees, and yet everyone has felt annoyed when someone has judged their music taste. Sometimes, we judge ourselves — there are guilty pleasure themed club nights, with DJs playing music that socially you shouldn't admit to enjoying. This judgement is facilitated through superiority contests over a variety of premises, from who is the bigger fan to what constitutes 'proper' music. Our capacity for judgement is so extensive that liking an artist can be a defining factor of your personality. Taylor Swift fans are branded online as 'girls who used to be into horses', which translates to privileged, probably white, and awkward. Issues of judgement span is a phenomenon not just among fans, but among artists as well. Yet, we are all aware that music taste is subjective, and everyone makes their personal aesthetic judgements. So why is this issue so widespread when we know it to be false?

In many ways judgement is natural, and plays a necessarily central role in all discussions around forms of artistic expression, not just music. Competitiveness is inherent to human nature, and enhanced by capitalism. Our individual sense of identity, shaped heavily by our likes and dislikes, is often threatened by the needs of the collective. An easy method to protect your individuality is to frame it as superior to someone else's. This is a theme that runs through the history of rap, Tupac claimed De La Soul, "... got a problem with this hard shit… I'ma keep it real, show you how it feels to ride". Ice T claimed Soulja Boy "single handedly killed hip hop" with the release of 'Crank 'Dat'. Large shifts in popular rap music, the rise of mumble rap, the use of autotune and trap beats to name a few, have caused many earlier rappers to criticise these new trends as they feel their own identity becoming threatened.

"I'm gonna defend my older heads and tell you you're not equal… problem is y'all want us to accept music that don't move nothing but the young." - Pete Rock

Those rappers' personal perspective on how rap should sound is central to their identity as an artist, and when their opinion falls out of fashion, artists feel compelled to express their musical superiority through comparative criticism. The comparative and public nature of the criticism demonstrates that these disagreements do not come from pedantic preference; rather, the evolution of a genre is taken as a personal insult.

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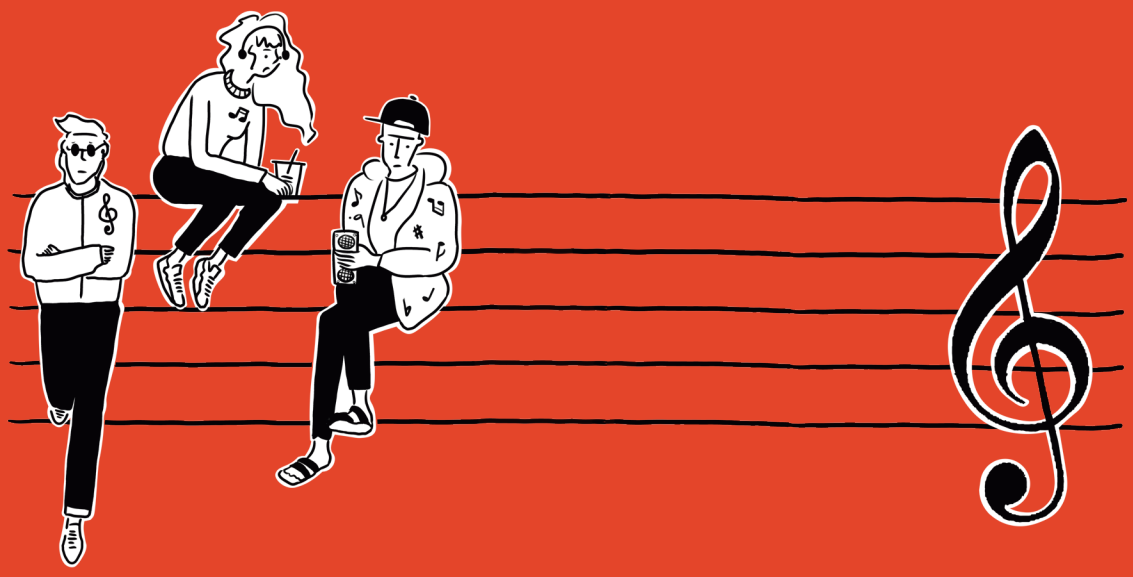


Musical prejudices can have much darker and deeper roots. Many artists and genres are dismissed or criticised unfairly due to racism and sexism. While necessary discussions about appropriation of Black culture, and white people's place in rap music continue to be had, there is a gendered double standard within the conversation. There are hardly any women on the hip hop scene — Black or white. Macklemore receives extremely little criticism, and cultural appropriation has never been mentioned within the public discussion of 2019 breakout star Aitch. Both Macklemore and Aitch are white men. The double standard is clear, white rappers are considered socially acceptable by many mainstream outlets unless they're women.

Rap as a whole is regularly criticized for lyrics that encourage antisocial behaviours, misogyny, homophobia, or drug use. While some rap does contain such lyricism, such accusations are framed as though hip hop is the only guilty party. Critics ignore the fact that such sentiments are prevalent within all of society, rather than a problem that is inherent in rap music. Iggy Pop released a song called "Sweet Sixteen" about wanting to have sex with a sixteen year old while he was aged 39. There are countless songs across various genres that promote drug use, either explicitly, such as "Heroin" by Lou Reed, or implicitly like "We Found Love" by Rihanna and Calvin Harris. Only hip hop receives the social criticism, when it is clear that this is multi-genre issue.

A clear example of this double standard can be seen in the media's treatment of Kayne West and indie-folk singer Father John Misty after they both sexually objectified Taylor Swift in their lyrics. West received a large amount of online scrutiny for his lyrics, "I feel like me and Taylor might still have sex/ Why? I made that bitch famous", from his single, "Famous". While the lyrics are both derogatory and inflammatory, there was silence online about Father John Misty's lyrics: "Bedding Taylor Swift / Every night inside the Oculus Rift".

The distancing effect of Misty's third person narrative compared to West's emphatic use of the first person can only explain this stark difference in response to a small extent. Accountability is clearly a selective process that is guided by societal values. Structural racism means that rap is often criticised and dismissed as it is seen as an extension of black culture, which is often depicted as poor, violent and backward.

Rap music is regularly used as a scapegoat for crime, such as CNN reporter Katerina Pierson commenting as recently as 2016, "rape culture is purported by none other than the entertainment industry, none other than hip-hop music, which you can hear on local radio stations." Hopefully this article does not need to explain why blaming rape culture on a musical genre is absurd. Viewing rap as an inferior musical genre is regularly based on a racist perspective, rather than as a matter of taste.

Musical superiority complexes are strange and multifaceted. They are an interesting paradox of despise when expressed, while it is too appealing to refrain from doing so. Musical superiority complexes are knowingly false, yet said with the conviction of the truth. The practice of judgement originates from human nature, but is influenced by ingrained social prejudices. Understanding the practice as a whole would be to fully understand the complexities of human nature and so it to an extent it will always remain a conundrum. Though, a complete understanding of it is obsolete when one simple answer will do: get over it! ■

The future (of guitar music) is female

Dani Mariam

Rock music, in its many incarnations and subcategories, has been one of the most dominant genres of music for the better part of the 20th century. Every time that rock has been presumed dead, it has come back in different forms. In the 80s, glam rock and hair metal dominated. As the 90s rolled around, the genre ventured into grunge, Britpop, and shoegaze. And even as recently as 2014, the evolution of rock gave us another iconic moment in history: Arctic Monkeys' BRIT awards speech, where lead singer Alex Turner dropped the microphone after stating, "Rock 'n' roll will never die."

It seems that since then, we've come a long way. As we enter a new decade, these repeated tropes of angst and attitude seem far behind us. Once again the question, "Is rock 'n' roll dying?" seems to be the question on every middle aged man's mind. Where are the Rolling Stones, the Led Zeppelins, or even the Nirvanas of today? In spite of all these worries, I am here to tell you that rock is still alive and well, albeit going through another timely evolution. Many of the prominent voices that we will hear in rock music for the coming decade are those of women.

Although we have had many female rock legends throughout history (Grace Slick, Stevie Nicks, and Joan Jett, to name a few), women are still largely underrepresented in rock music; especially when compared to Pop, where female artists make up approximately half of the market. It's not as if women don't listen to rock music — as a matter of fact, many rock bands throughout the ages have had large female fanbases. As of this year, it was reported that only 8% of Rock & Roll Hall of Fame inductees were women, proving that there is still much work to be done to combat sexism in the genre. On a brighter note, a 2018 Fender study found that 50% of new guitar players are female, so the statistics are sure to change. We are seeing more and more promising female artists gaining popularity both critically and commercially within the genre. In fact, some of 2019's most critically acclaimed rock albums were penned by women, including Julia Jacklin's Crushing, and Angel Olsen's All Mirrors (incidentally, some of my personal favourite albums of last year). Rolling Stone called Spanish all-girl garage outfit Hinds "one of the most exciting new rock groups to emerge in recent years" after the release of their last album in 2018. This shift is even apparent in our local Toronto scene. Female-fronted Alvvays has been one of the most popular indie bands to come out of the city. Another Toronto-based, all-girl rock band, The Beaches, have toured with Passion Pit, and were even selected as the opener for the Rolling Stones' sole Canadian show on their summer 2019 world tour.

In many ways, women are changing the overall landscape of rock music. In 2009, Lady Gaga spoke out about sexism in the music industry, claiming that male rock stars were allowed to, and even praised for, doing the same things that she is always critiqued for. And it seems that women have generally taken a softer approach to rock music, favouring emotion and self-reflection over attitude or angst. Mitski paints a picture of her loneliness fuelled downward spiral on "Nobody", and Angel Olsen sings about the journey of her and her lover's growth over the years on "Spring". Even songs with a fair amount of angst, like The Regrettes' "Seashore", seem to demonstrate a deeper perspective. Power and reason back up the anger and attitude; the band pointing their fingers at sexism and underestimation, rather than shouting an empty "fuck you" at the whole world.

I am not anti-rock 'n' roll. In fact, rock is one of my favourite genres of music. But at the core of every movement, whether it be folk, or punk. or early 2000s indie rock, what stays stagnant beyond the test of time are real people with real stories. These female artists in rock music are giving us new perspectives on the human experience, and that's what makes their music so fresh and captivating for many listeners, including myself. So if you're a woman and you're thinking of picking up a guitar (or an electric bass, or some drum sticks!), please do so. The world of rock 'n' roll could really use your voice. ■

"Rock is still alive and well, albeit going through another timely evolution. Many of the prominent voices that we will hear in rock music for the coming decade are those of women."

Photo © Ebru Yildiz

WHOLE NEW WORLD

ON PC MUSIC AND THE FUTURE OF POP MUSIC

Zain Ahmad

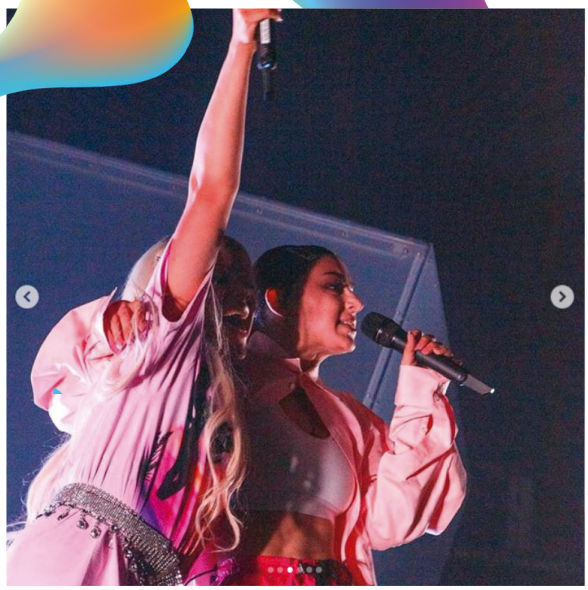
Photo © Henry Redcliffe

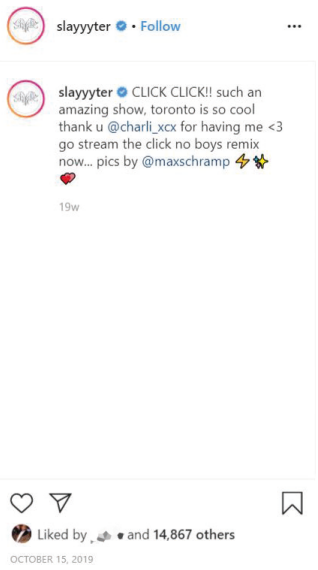
I was first introduced to what would become the future of pop music in 2015. An avid Charli XCX fan, I tuned in to the first episode of her new Beats 1 Radio show, *The Candy Shop*. Coming off the release of 2014's *Sucker*, Charli was set to debut new music, which she had previously described as being "the most pop thing, and the most electronic thing" she had done to date. I had no idea what to expect. Thus far, her music had more or less been palatable, somewhat-alternative skewing pop, and I was inclined to believe that her new stuff would harken back to the sounds from her debut album, *True Romance*. Boy, was I wrong. The moment I first heard her chant "Let's ride!" over an industrial sounding beat, I knew that I had entered the future. Over the next two hours, Charli's show introduced me to the bizarre, sped-up world of PC music, one marked by textured sounds, pitched voices, and an overriding sense of euphoria. I had never heard anything of the sort—sounds clearly mired in early 2000s pop that simultaneously still managed to sound as though they had been beamed in from a distant, sleek future. As she played songs from various new collaborators such as SOPHIE, A.G. Cook, and Hannah Diamond, one thing was certain: I was hooked.

PC Music refers to both a record label and an art collective founded by Alex 'A.G.' Cook, a producer who was attending school at Goldsmiths, University of London at the time of its inception. According to Cook, the 'PC' in PC Music stands for 'Personal Computer,' a term meant to highlight the music's tendency to sound both incredibly mechanical and intimate. "I was trying to think about how you could make music on the computer that had personality, or felt very intimate or uncanny," he stated in an interview with *Dazed* Magazine. "I was burned out on studying and wanted to test these ideas in the real world."

PC Music is notable for its exaggerated take on traditional pop music. The structures inherent to pop are all still there, but they've been amplified and distorted to their logical extremes, resulting in highly stylized, textured, yet cartoonishly bubble-gum sounds. In his attempt to push the boundaries of pop music, Cook's project quickly gained a following and was transformed into a legitimate movement.

"The structures inherent to pop are all still there, but they've been amplified and distorted to their logical extremes, resulting in highly stylized, textured, yet cartoonishly bubble-gum sounds."

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"PC Music had transitioned from a collective attempting to parody pop music to a subgenre of its own that now operated within the bounds of the pop machine itself."

The movement has always been one centred on collaboration—the earliest PC Music artists were friends of Cook, such as his childhood friend Danny L. Harle, or singer Hannah Diamond. "The attitude that anyone can make music on a laptop with friends, make one hyper-sleek portrait, and declare themselves a pop star was massively influential on contemporary music," said Caroline Polachek, a PC-affiliated musician, in the same interview with *Dazed*. "Except it was genuinely cheeky when PC Music did it, 'cause it was a marketing-themed game, and not game-themed marketing."

Utilizing shared glossy, sleek visuals to promote themselves as major pop stars, PC Music entered the UK electronic scene. It's especially interesting to see how various artists with disparate sounds gathered under the PC Music label to promote their shared vision for the future of pop music. No two artists on the label were sonically similar, really. Hannah Diamond's overwrought pop differed from GFOTY's parodic electronics, which differed from Life Sim's simple yet elegant sounds, which differed from Kane West's four-on-the-floor techno, and so forth. Yet, they utilized a shared aesthetic in order to promote themselves as a collective and gain recognition on a global scale.

As PC Music began to gain traction both within the UK and online, it garnered the attention of music critics who were initially baffled, unsure as to whether they should take the collective as something serious or as a parody piece. "PC Music: the future of pop or 'contemptuous parody'?" a 2015 headline from *The Guardian* reads, and a 2014 article from Pitchfork describes it as "one of the freshest, funniest, and most confounding pop-music phenomena to appear in a long time…(a) label capable of absorbing virtually any influence and making it a part of its own warped pop totality". Major labels soon began to take note as well, and in 2015 the label announced a partnership with Columbia Records. PC Music had transitioned from a collective attempting to parody pop music to a subgenre of its own that now operated within the bounds of the pop machine itself. The fruit of this partnership was relatively short-lived: save for a few modestly popular songs released by Danny L. Harle— one of the first PC artists signed to Columbia— it proved to be difficult to translate the work that PC Music was doing to the context of a major record label. Following a change in Columbia's management, the label's partnership ended, and PC Music's moment in the spotlight ended.

While that signified the end of an era, PC Music had already left a lasting mark on popular culture. Charli XCX brought the collective into mainstream consciousness through her radio show and subsequent collaborations with PC members. Her phenomenal mixtapes released in 2017, *Number 1 Angel and Pop 2*, were executive produced by Cook and involved several collaborations with other PC members, as well as her third studio album *Charli*. Meanwhile, SOPHIE, a PC-affiliated artist, released her debut album to critical acclaim, securing a Grammy nomination for Best Electronic Album in the process. Her uniquely textured sounds served as an inspiration for Flume's latest mixtape, which also had two songs featuring her on it. Post-PC Music, the "hyperpop" genre has taken off, spearheaded by newer, eclectic artists such as 100 gecs and Slayyyter. The PC Music label itself has expanded, adding newer artists to their roster such as 20-year old producer Umru Rothenberg and Swedish singer Namasenda.

"A.G. Cook emailed me, and I thought it was a joke or prank or something," Umru told me over a Facetime interview. "I got this "@PCmusic email in 2017 or something. He literally just randomly found my stuff on Soundcloud, like browsing through whatever. I don't know. I still have no idea where he found it." After being contacted by Cook, Umru was asked to help produce the Charli XCX track *I Got It,* an explosive, wild ride featuring rappers Cupcakke and Brooke Candy.

"We never really worked on anything until he was in New York for a Charli show – the Number 1 Angel New York show," Umru recalls. "He invited me to show, and then had me come to a studio with just him somewhere in New York a couple of days later. We worked on *I Got It* the next time he was in New York, and it was right before the song came out. It was one of the last things that they finished for Pop 2 - he wanted the production to be as intense as possible. And originally, he was going to try and get different people to do the verses - have it totally different each verse. So I was all the stuff I did was produced underneath Cupcakke's verse, and then he kind of took everything I did and put it all around the track." *Rothenberg's experience is indicative of just how highly collaborative the production process tends to be in the age of the Internet, where physical distance no longer poses a barrier.*

As an artist signed to the PC Music label, Rothenberg is at the forefront of the musical revolution underway in pop. "Less conventional techniques of recording and producing are becoming the norm now," he says. "People like Charli had been way ahead of everybody with seeking out really experimental and interesting producers – it's so cool to see everything like that becoming the mainstream." And indeed, in a post-PC world, 'hyperpop' is growing to be the norm with regard to pop music, especially since it's been intrinsically tied to the internet since the movement's PC Music beginnings. Apps such as TikTok are helping to propagate this genre of music, propelling artists such as Slayyyter into the spotlight. 100 gecs, an experimental duo consisting of Dylan Brady and Laura Les, had one of the year's most acclaimed pop releases, and are now collaborating with high-profile artists such as Rico Nasty and Fall Out Boy. And while Charli's latest album was also her most experimental, it prompted a sold-out international tour. There's something about highly personal yet artificial, sped-up, loud pop music that appears to be resonating with audiences worldwide.

"Everything for kids now is just faster and more immediate and more, like, in your face," Umru says. "And just the way that everything else in the world is being thrown at people, you want the music to be as tactile, and right there as possible. Even for people to notice stuff, it needs to stand out in a way that's very immediate."

This is the climate that we're living in in a Post-PC Music world. In the five years since the collective first appeared on the world's stage, an almost infinite number of possibilities have opened up with regard to the future of pop music. One question remains: where do we go from here?

"I think it's a hard thing to predict," says Rothenberg when posed with the question. "It's both very popular stuff that's getting increasingly kind of aggressive and fast and loud, and that's one direction I know that music's going to keep going, although I don't even know how much further it can go after stuff like 100 gecs blowing up - that's literally mainstream now. It's crazy. I think stuff is going to get more experimental, and that's just going to become the new norm: more immediate and loud and upfront music. But also I think there's a whole other side of stuff that's more bedroom-pop type music. There's still definitely kind of a sense of familiarity and nostalgia that people want to relate to, and to have much simpler music that's not about production and how it sounds – more recorded with instruments and everything. I don't think that's going to go away in any way. It's hard to predict anything right now more than ever."

One thing is for certain: PC Music has opened the gate for pop music to be more self-reflexive, weird, and experimental than ever before. Thinking back on it, I'm taken back to that day in 2015, right before Charli introduced Bip Ling's wonderfully strange track *Bip Burger*:"This will split people's opinion," she said. "You're either going to think I'm an idiot, or you're going to think I'm a genius – obviously, the right answer is genius."

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